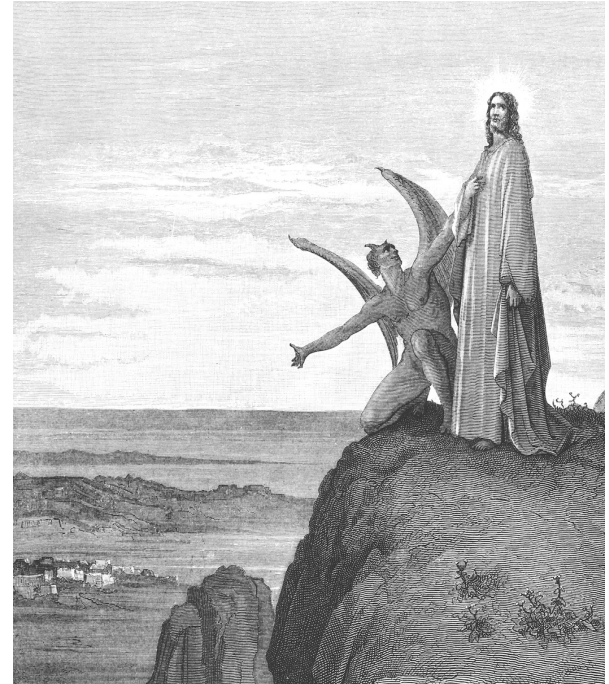


# THE LUTHERAN HERALD



**QUINQUAGESIMA—OCULI**  
**(MARCH 2—MARCH 29, 2014)**

**A PUBLICATION OF**  
**THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN DIOCESE OF**  
**NORTH AMERICA**

## FROM THE PROPERs FOR QUINQUAGESIMA

### THE GOSPEL

ST. LUKE 18:31-43 (NKJV)

Then He took the twelve aside and said to them, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. They will scourge Him and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again.” But they understood none of these things; this saying was hidden from them, and they did not know the things which were spoken.

Then it happened, as He was coming near Jericho, that a certain blind man sat by the road begging. And hearing a multitude passing by, he asked what it meant. So they told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. And he cried out, saying, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Then those who went before warned him that he should be quiet; but he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be brought to Him. And when he had come near, He asked him, saying, “What do you want Me to do for you?”

He said, “Lord, that I may receive my sight.”

Then Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he received his sight, and followed Him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.

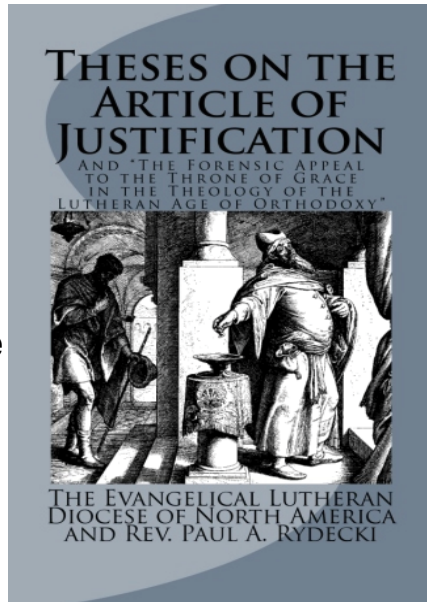
### THE COLLECT

O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully hear our prayers and, having set us free from the bonds of sin, defend us from all evil; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Savior, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

doctrine taught by Holy Scripture and rightly confessed in the Book of Concord of 1580. However, because some individuals outside of the diocese have objected to the clear statement of Lutheran teaching set forth in these theses, it was deemed best to publish the theses to make them available for others to read and assess for themselves the doctrine of the ELDoNA in light of God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions. As the "Theses on the Article of Justification" make reference to Pastor Paul Rydecki's 2013 paper, "The Forensic Appeal to the Throne of Grace in the Theology of the Lutheran Age of Orthodoxy: A Reflection on Atonement and Its Relationship to Justification," that paper is published by permission of its author in conjunction with the theses as a supplemental resource for understanding the doctrine of Justification.

**Paperback • ISBN 1-891469541 • 118 pages • \$6.95**

**Theses on the Article  
of Justification  
and  
The Forensic Appeal  
to the Throne of Grace  
in the Theology of the  
Lutheran Age of  
Orthodoxy**



This book contains the "Theses on the Article of Justification as Taught in Holy Scripture and the Confessions of Christ's Holy Church with Special Attention to "Objective Justification" which were discussed during the 2013 Colloquium and Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America (ELDoNA) and which were later approved in the following form by the pastors of the diocese. As noted in the conclusion of the "Theses," this document was created for use within the diocese (thus it is clearly stated, in the conclusion: "Those inside our fellowship voluntarily agree with these theses and support them, but we also wish to have these theses function as a marker of agreement between Christians who are not yet necessarily in fellowship. Therefore, we invite all who agree with these theses to express their agreement without necessarily committing themselves to fellowship."). The diocese does not require other Lutheran synods to subscribe to the theses as a step necessary for retaining or establishing fellowship, nor is subscription to the theses sufficient for establishing fellowship. Fellowship is recognized only on the basis of agreement in the

"O Almighty God" are the words that begin the Christian's confession of sins in the Divine Service. These words are also a confession of the authority and power of God. Almighty God has charge over all men because He created man. He maintains man's life—or ends it—according to His giving and taking of the very breath of life. The eyes of man's Judge see all that we do in and with our lives, leaving us no place to hide ourselves. Each of us is left without excuse for the sins and iniquities with which we offend Him. "O Almighty God, I . . . justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment."

Almighty God is also the end of the Christian's confession of sins, for the Almighty God to whom we confess our sins uses His authority and power to bring to an end the power of sin over us. In today's reading Elihu rightly proclaims that the Almighty God will never pervert His justice—which means He will not break the promise He has made in Christ to do justice to the world. Almighty God indeed provides justice for all, by punishing the wicked as they deserve, and by forgiving the sins of penitent and believing sinners solely for the sake of His Crucified and Risen Son, Christ Jesus. Through Baptism, Confession, and the Supper, Almighty God uses elements of nature to convey supernaturally the Father's re-creation, the Son's redemption, and the Holy Spirit's sanctification to us poor, miserable sinners. It is by these gifts that we might live through the almighty power of His Word and His Spirit—for now and forever!

Elihu remains the voice of a “prosperity gospel,” which says, “Do good and God will do good to you.” The voice of Elihu condemns us when we suffer any sort of affliction in this life. “If you are suffering, what have you done to deserve such wrath?” The idea of what Elihu says today is that one suffers as punishment for one’s sin, but when one turns from sin, the Lord will stop punishing. However, this is not the true gospel.

The Scriptures teach us instead that suffering is part of the life of the baptized. If you are in Christ, you will suffer, because Christ your Lord suffered while in the flesh. Your suffering is not to atone for your own sins. Your sins have been atoned for in Christ’s death, and that atonement is given to you by faith, which is itself a gift of God. Rather, your suffering is part your heavenly Father’s good will to conform you into the image of His only-begotten Son. St. Peter says, “Rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:13). St. Paul tells you that, “as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation” (2 Corinthians 1:7).

Pharaoh had had a troubling dream, and the butler whose dream Joseph had interpreted many years earlier finally remembered Joseph, and spoke of him to Pharaoh. Now he stands before Pharaoh, and Pharaoh wants him to work his magic and interpret the dream.

Joseph makes it clear that he is no magician. The interpretation of dreams is not his, but comes from God. The self-centered arrogance of Joseph’s earlier years is gone. He gives all glory to God alone.

What a great standard by which to measure our own words and attitudes! Are we glorying in ourselves, or are we giving all praise and honor and glory to God? Selfishness seeks our own glory; faithfulness gives all glory to God. Faith recognizes that it is not just pious to give all glory to God; it’s just plain honest. Whatever gifts and abilities we have, He has given us. Whatever we have accomplished with them, He gave us the drive to do that. And most of all, the forgiveness of sins and the eternal life that we have is also purely a gift from Him, given us by the shed blood of Jesus Christ. To God alone be the glory. Amen.

A butler and a baker were with Joseph in prison. Joseph received a vision that the baker would be put to death, but the butler would be restored. He asked only that the butler would speak of him to the Pharaoh and get him out of prison. And the butler promptly forgot him. Joseph wanted freedom. He put his hope in a man, and the man disappointed him.

We know what we want for our lives, and we too get disappointed if the people we're counting on to deliver end up failing us. There are two things wrong with this. The first is that we are really living a "my will be done" life, and second is that we are trusting in the arm of flesh. God gave Joseph a few more years in prison—years that he needed to repent of these things. So let us learn from him and repent of our "my will be done" attitude, instead praying with ever greater sincerity, "Thy will be done." And God grant us grace further to trust that even when people disappoint us, God has use of that too, to accomplish what He would have done in our lives. His will is always good and gracious, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

The first verses of Genesis fill us with wonder at the creative power of the Word of God. The Lord speaks and His will is accomplished. His Word does what it says. The refrain "and God saw that it was good" teaches us that what God speaks is good. His creation behaves as it is created to do. The elements obey His voice and separate and divide as the Lord orders them. Light and darkness separate to form day and night. Waters separate to make firmament, sea, and dry land. The creation worships its creator by acting according to His Word.

But this is not the case with humanity. Adam and Eve fall into sin. While the sun, moon, stars, and the rest of creation obey God's Word, humanity, at the temptation of Satan, does not. Adam and Eve's sin lives in each of us so that we too would live our lives according to our own word of imagination and opinion rather than God's Word.

But God's Word still does what it says. God provided a Gospel Word to Adam and Eve, promising them the Messiah and salvation from sin. That Word of Gospel was used by His Spirit to create faith in their hearts and make them righteous before God. To you and me, the Lord's absolving Word of Christ crucified still is spoken loudly in the Divine Service and by the pastors who hear our sins confessed. That absolving word of God does what it says. By it your sins are forgiven before God in heaven. As Lent begins, examine whether you are listening to God's Word or your own word, and repent so that you might hear and believe His absolving Word.

At the end of His creative work the Triune God rests. He rests not out of necessity, but to teach us about Jesus who is our Sabbath rest. Some mistakenly demand that we must worship on Saturdays as God commanded the Hebrews. They make the day of rest another attempt to please God with works and superficial pious attitudes. The Judaizer and one who desires righteousness by works are the same. Neither will let Jesus be our true Sabbath rest.

Jesus is the only rest for our weary souls. Only by faith in Christ do we find solace and peace from a conscience attacked by guilt over sin. Only by faith in Christ do we receive repose from disputation with the devil, who seeks to lead us into further temptation, despair of God's mercy, and other great shame and vice. Only through faith in Christ Jesus are we justified before God the Father. Our sins are blotted out by Him, removed "as far as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12), and we receive true consolation that God is for us and not against us.

As God initiated His rest on the seventh day He initiates our rest by giving us faith through the proclamation of His Gospel in Word and Sacrament, so that we know that such rest is not earned, but given, and therefore can be enjoyed for the repose it truly is.

Joseph was being tempted by Potiphar's wife. She wanted to have immoral sexual relations with him. Joseph refused. But it is important to know the reason. His first concern was not betraying Potiphar, or compromising his own virtue, or defiling this woman. His first concern was that he would be sinning against God.

In our day and age all manner of sexual immorality is excused, simply by saying, "They're consenting adults. Who are they hurting?" And to an unbelieving world, that makes sense. But for us, our first priority is to honor God.

So we repent, not only of what we have done, but of how we think. While it matters to us how we treat other people, it should matter to us even more whether or not we are honoring God. Thanks be to God, our Lord Jesus Christ honored God perfectly, and because of His death on the Cross, we are credited with Jesus' righteousness. God the Father grant us His Holy Spirit that we may live up to the righteousness He has given us in Christ Jesus.

God had revealed His plans to Joseph. The dreams really were from God, but Joseph made sinful use of them, arrogantly boasting of God's special choosing of himself. His brothers responded sinfully to this sinful boasting, not believing the visions were from God, and resenting this younger full-of-himself sibling. When he went out to them, they threw him in a well and eventually sold him into slavery. Joseph ended up in Egypt, and only after years of hardship learned to receive God's revelation humbly and faithfully.

We too have been blessed by God to know that we are His redeemed children through faith in Christ Jesus. This gift could make us arrogant, yet St. Paul says that this faith is not of ourselves, lest any man should boast. So we humbly acknowledge our sin and confess that God has been gracious to us in Christ Jesus. Also, we humbly pray that God would use us to speak His grace and mercy in Christ Jesus to others, that they may be made heirs of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

A river went out from Eden, parted, and became four riverheads, one being the Gihon (verse 13). These waters flowed from paradise to water the earth. That paradise would be lost for all men due to the sin of Adam and Eve. Angels would bar the entrance into the Garden. Ten generations later the great deluge would wipe this paradise off the map entirely, showing it is impossible for man to regain paradise by his own ways. Years later in the city of Jerusalem there would be a small stream with a similar name and there God would show us a glimpse of the reopening of paradise for sinful humanity. We read in 1 Kings 1:45-46, "So Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet have anointed him king at Gihon; and they have gone up from there rejoicing, so that the city is in an uproar. This is the noise that you have heard. Also Solomon sits on the throne of the kingdom." Once again there is a Gihon river, and at that spot God anoints His king whose name means "peace."

Our Lord Jesus Christ is King Solomon's greater Son, who is not only King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but also is the Prince of *Peace* who will "save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). By His perfect obedience, His bitter passion, and His death, Christ atones for the sins of the world, earning for all mankind the forgiveness of sins. He gives us this treasure through the Word and Sacraments, so that we might believe, and by believing have life in His name and enjoy the true eternal paradise with Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Law shows us our nakedness before God. When the Law exposes our sinful deeds it strips us bare before God. When the Law says, “Thou shalt,” we must confess that “we have not.” When the Law confronts us with “Thou shalt not” we must confess that “we most certainly have.” We have no defense before God. We can say, “We were born this way,” and that would be correct. We are born sinful and unclean; but that is not an excuse. The Law confronts us just as it confronted Adam and Eve, who heard the voice of God in the Garden and fled in their guilt and shame. Their own excuses could not cover their sin.

The Gospel covers our shame. In God’s mercy He gives Adam and Eve the first statement of the Gospel. The Seed of the Woman will triumph over the seed of the serpent. The Seed of the Woman will not go through that battle unscathed, but the serpent will fare far worse, having his head bruised and his power destroyed. This is the first promise of Christ’s death (the serpent bruising his heel) and Christ’s defeat of the devil (the bruising of Satan’s head). Through this promise the Holy Spirit works faith, and trusting in this promise brings salvation from the guilt of sins, even before the Lord accomplishes it in the Son’s work. Our Lord Jesus truly covers man’s guilt and forgives his iniquity. God then clothes Adam and Eve physically as a sign of what He does for all who believe the Gospel of the Promised Seed; He forgives us our sins and covers all who believe with robes of righteousness which endure forever.

Jacob means “heel puller.” He was literally born grasping the heel of his brother Esau. But “heel-puller” has a figurative meaning. Similar to our expression, “to pull someone’s leg,” only worse, it means to be a maliciously deceptive person. Jacob had spent much of his life living down to his name, bilking his brother out of his birthright, and then deceiving his father into giving him his brother’s blessing.

Then one fateful night a divine being wrestled with Jacob and put his hip out of place. Jacob was out of tricks. All he could do was hang on. And God changed him. God also changed his name to Israel, “the man who wrestles with God.”

In baptism God calls us by name and makes us His own. He changes us and makes us new creations. We still sometimes wrestle with what God is doing in our lives, but as those redeemed by Christ, we know we must hang on to God, and He will see us safely into the promised land of Heaven.



Can you imagine Jacob's outrage? He had been lied to, deceived, baited and switched. He had labored long and hard to receive as a wife the woman he desired, only to be given her sister. Isn't it ironic how Jacob, who had spent so much of his life deceiving other people, got so upset when someone deceived him?

We are like that, aren't we? We sin against others in so many ways, yet when someone sins against us we go into "How dare they?" mode. They should not do evil against us, but as our Lord clearly teaches us, we should remove the log from our own eye before we try to remove the speck from someone else's. You can not repent of other people's sins for them. You can repent of your own.

Therefore, let us examine our lives, see our own sins, and confess them to God our Father. Confessing them, we rejoice that God is ever merciful toward us for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ. And knowing that we have the mercies of God, it makes even the injustices of other people easier to bear.

**THE HOLY GOSPEL      ST. MATTHEW 4:1-11 (NKJV)**

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the LORD your God.'" Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.'" Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him.

**THE COLLECT**

O Lord, mercifully hear our prayer and stretch forth the right hand of Thy majesty to defend us from them that rise up against us; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Today's text opens with the sons of God (most likely the line of Seth, which had to this point been faithful to God) engaging in marriage with the daughters of men who were defiant of God, as was the case in the descendants of Cain. The offspring of these mixed marriages degenerated ever more into sin. As a result wickedness became universal and every intention of the thoughts of man's heart was "only evil continually."

However, Noah found favor in God's eyes. The cause of the difference between a good man and the openly wicked is not their natural disposition, but divine favor or grace according to the working of His Spirit. The fruits of this grace are piety toward God, integrity, uprightness, benevolence toward men. God further extends this grace in establishing a Covenant with Noah; He makes an agreement or pact between God and man. Although sinful man is in no position to bargain with God, His proposed transaction with man is like a contract because it stipulates what God, on the one hand, has pledged Himself to do on man's behalf and what man, on the other hand, is to do in response. In His covenant God extends undeserved mercy to man, and man continues in it (also with God's merciful provision through His Holy Spirit) by simply believing God's promise and expressing that faith in obedience to the terms of the covenant. By faith Noah constructed an ark for the saving of his household. In this and all God's covenants, He continues His work of carrying out His plan for man's salvation in Christ Jesus.

**THE HOLY GOSPEL****ST. LUKE 11:14-28 (NKJV)**

And He was casting out a demon, and it was mute. So it was, when the demon had gone out, that the mute spoke; and the multitudes marveled. But some of them said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons." Others, testing Him, sought from Him a sign from heaven. But He, knowing their thoughts, said to them: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and a house divided against a house falls. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? Because you say I cast out demons by Beelzebub. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.

"When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace. But when a stronger than he comes upon him and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils. He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters. When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first."

And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, "Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!" But He said, "More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

**THE COLLECT**

We beseech Thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desires of Thy humble servants and stretch forth the right hand of Thy majesty to be our defense against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

In this week's readings we have seen men and women of faith act honorably to God's call. Today's reading shows us the darker side of man. God carries out His good will for man in spite of the sinful and stubborn actions of His children. All four characters in today's narrative showcase man's darker side. Isaac was the head of the family and the responsible party in carrying out God's will to designate Jacob as the continuing bearer of the promised Seed according to God's statement given to Rebekah even before Esau's birth: "Two nations are in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). Yet Isaac decides to pass on that blessing to Esau. Esau was a willing accomplice to the plan.

Then the story brings us to mother Rebekah. Her deception, with her favored son Jacob, assured the prophecy would be fulfilled, but for the wrong reason. So all four members of Isaac's family showed their worst side in this chaotic fiasco over a bowl of stew. One might think that Jacob, who is God's chosen to continue the Messianic line, would be above such things. But instead of questioning his mother's deceitful plan, he only worries about getting caught.

How sad that these chosen people of God, these people of promise, behave so shamefully. How remarkable that God calls and uses them in spite of their sinfulness. And how amazing is God's grace that He does the same for you and for me.

The waters that were held in balance by God's ordinance of the second and third days of creation are now permitted to break those established barriers. As they poured upon the earth from above and below they produced a flood similar to the primeval deep. Within the context of this world wide flood the Lord shut Noah in. God kept His promise to Noah and his family to keep them alive by making them secure against the raging disaster. When God locks the door to danger, no power in heaven or earth can break it down and touch those who have entered the "ark" of His protection.

God's protection comes to us through His chosen Means of Grace, found in Word and Sacrament. Martin Luther used a baptismal prayer that points to the flood as one of the Old Testament examples foreshadowing Christian baptism. God's righteous judgment condemned the unbelieving world through the flood, yet according to His great mercy He preserved believing Noah and his family. Luther saw this event foreshadowing the blessed flood and washing away of sin found in Christ's Holy Baptism.

Throughout Genesis we see that God is the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of His creation and His creatures. Noah and his family were graciously delivered from death into life through the means of the ark of wood. Likewise, we are graciously delivered from death into life through the ark of Christ's baptismal flood that washes away our sin, and presents us before the Lord justified by His grace.

The rainbow becomes a sign of the covenant between God and man; the Lord promises never again to destroy the world with a flood due to man's wickedness. A covenant sign was a visible seal and reminder of covenant commitments. Circumcision would become the sign of the covenant with Abraham, and the Sabbath would be the sign of the covenant with Israel at Sinai. God's decision never again to destroy every living creature as He had just done by the flood was not prompted by a change in human nature. Man remained what he had been: evil from his youth, down to the source of his action and the roots of his thinking. Nor was God moved to leniency because Noah and his family had offered Him a sacrifice.

We are told through God's word recorded in the New Testament that in divine forbearance God passed over sins, reserving full judgment upon ungodly men until the Last Day. In the meantime, those who through Jesus, the Mediator of a new covenant, confess their guilt and plead for reconciliation become a "pleasing aroma" to God by virtue of Christ's sacrifice. Through faith that looks to Jesus Christ, who was lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness, whoever believes in Him is declared a new man, justified before God by His grace, and destined to have eternal life.

The narrative of the search for Isaac's wife continues. After the remarkable meeting at the well Abraham's servant is welcomed to Rebekah's house. The hosts share generous hospitality with their guest, who is most anxious to tell them about his mission. Even before taking a bite of food, the servant of Abraham relates in detail the task his master had given him. It is significant that he repeats of the oath he took: "Now my master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I dwell; but you shall go to my father's house and to my family, and take a wife for my son.'"

The details of the story obviously leave a deep impression on Rebekah's family. After hearing the whole account her brother Laban and father Bethuel respond, "The thing comes from the LORD; we cannot speak to you either bad or good. Here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and let her be your master's son's wife, as the LORD has spoken." Whatever opinions they may have about this startling proposal, they see this plan is from the Lord. Rebekah is consulted and she immediately consents to go with Abraham's servant to be united with her future husband.

How remarkable and powerful God's Word and will are. We often take for granted what miracles are borne when His Word is spoken. Today's narrative might seem outlandish to us, yet it convinced the minds and hearts of an entire family. Let us rejoice in God's life-changing Word that also works on us, bringing us from the darkness of sin into His marvelous light.

When Abraham was advanced in years he appointed his most trusted servant to choose a wife for his son, Isaac. It would mean a journey of many miles back to Abraham's old home in Haran. Abraham wants to ensure that his servant does not pick the wife from the Canaanites. Abraham had good reason to be wary of them, as their idolatrous religion would pollute the ideas of God's people. Therefore, the warning against being "unequally yoked" is not a new concept. St. Paul shares Abraham's concerns in 2 Corinthians 6: "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people'" (verses 14-16).

The idea of a "mixed marriage" has held many meanings. At a time not long ago it referred to marrying someone outside of your faith. That was considered taboo. But in today's society, often it does not matter what the other half believes. It does not even seem to matter what gender one marries, which is a testimony to how far the human race has fallen in our time. As for us Christians, let us treasure the faith we have been given, and let nothing challenge its position of greatest importance.

Throughout Abram's life he passed through the promised land as a foreigner, for Abram held title to the land only by faith in the promise of God. During his entire life he passed through the land and moved his tent from place to place, always a landless sojourner in occupied territory because the Canaanites dwelt in the land. Though this is true, we are told that he built there an altar to God. So far only God had spoken. No words of Abram's response are recorded; he walked the way of obedience in "silence."

Abram's compliance with the divine directive was not a grudging, sullen surrender to the power of a nameless fate though. At Shechem and Bethel he built altars in order to "call upon the name of the Lord" in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. Abram walked humbly with his God, in submission through faith, all his life looking exclusively to the promise yet unfulfilled that his offspring would possess the land of promise.

Example of faith though he was, Abram was not a hero who gathered glory by feats of human prowess. No special physical or mental endowments of this hero of faith are mentioned. He was big or small in the measure that he responded to what the Lord said. His achievements exemplify what "vessels of clay" can do when God is their hope. Likewise, his failures exemplify what vessels of clay can do when God is *not* their hope, for God's way is perfect. The Word of the Lord proves true; He is a shield for all those who take refuge in Him—but without God no good thing is possible.

After being forced to face his sinful behavior, brought on by his failure to trust that the Lord would guide and protect him in Egypt, Abram returned to the altar of God. As if to make a new beginning, Abram returned to the place where he had made an altar. Here he again called on the name of the Lord in order to seek strength for his weakness through renewed communion with God. Although his flight into Egypt resulted in his deceit, God stood ready to restore him and to give him continued assurances of His grace.

Though God forgave the sin, it appears the temporal riches acquired in Egypt under sinful false pretenses turned out to be a source of trouble, rather than a blessing. This earthly abundance threatened to cause strife between Abram and Lot. After their separation Abram built an altar at Mamre. Abram once again sought strength to believe what day by day appeared a greater impossibility.

Continual communication with God is essential to a life of faith, and necessary in order to rightly use the blessings, meet the trials, and discharge the duties of life. Contrast the actions of Lot on the other hand, who pitched his tents near Sodom. Since the men of Sodom were known to be wicked, Lot was flirting with temptation by choosing to live near them. Lot and Abram are a study in contrasts. The former looked upon the land selfishly and coveted; the latter looked as God commanded, and was blessed.

As difficult as it must have been to carry out the exile of Ishmael, Abraham now faces a much sterner test. Now God was asking him to give up his long-awaited son. This was no exile in the wilderness, it was to be a sacrifice of Isaac's very life.

To further complicate matters, Isaac was not only Abraham and Sarah's promised son, he was the son of the Promise. Through his line the Messiah would come. God seemed to be breaking His own promise. And it was not just any promise, but the most important one of all. How could this possibly turn out well?

Nevertheless, Abraham was given the faith to carry out God's command. We are given insight into his trust in the book of Hebrews. "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called,' concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense" (Hebrews 11:17-19).

With Abraham now fully committed to the task, God rescues Abraham and Isaac before the climactic act. The substitution of the ram will spare the life of the son. But there will come another time, another climactic act, where God will not spare the Son, but give Him up as a ransom for all. In giving up His Son, the Father will show His unconditional love for all men. Behold the real Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

In God's way and time Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah. In contrast to the disbelieving laughter of Sarah in Genesis 18, today we see her faithfulness as she marvels at the miracle God has wrought. But there is trouble on the horizon. Ishmael, 14 years the senior of Isaac, is mocking the son of the promise, and even though Ishmael was born according to Sarah's wrongful design, she now recognizes that Isaac is the rightful heir according to God's Word. To protect her young son she wants Ishmael and his mother Hagar to be banished. Out of compassion, Abraham does not want to go through with Sarah's plan, but God said to Abraham, "Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called."

But God would not have Hagar and Ishmael sent out without protection and a future. God would make sure their physical needs were met, and promised also that a great nation would arise from Ishmael. How often God works in ways that are strange and foreign to us. Rarely do we see, in our short-sighted humanity, the wonders of His unfolding plan of salvation:

God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.  
Deep in unfathomable mines of never-failing skill  
He treasures up His bright designs and works His sovereign

will. (TLH 514:1-2)

The Word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward." Whether "shield" or "defense" is meant, the reference is to the Lord as Abram's sole protector. Though Abram was quite rich in earthly possessions, God Himself was also Abram's greatest treasure. After this most gracious proclamation of divine favor the Lord assures Abram of its validity through the granting of a special vision, demonstrating its great surety.

God further declares "I am the Lord, who brought you out." Ancient royal covenants often began with the self-identification of the king and a brief historical prologue, and His Words here point to Abram's being brought out of the land of the Chaldeans by the grace of the Lord. In ancient times the parties to an agreement or contract solemnized a covenant by walking down an aisle flanked by the pieces of slaughtered animals. The practice signified a self-maledictory oath: "May it be so done to me if I do not keep my oath and pledge."

Having credited Abram's faith as righteousness, God now graciously ministered to his need for assurance concerning the land. He granted Abram a promissory covenant, as He had to Noah. Abram's vision has a smoking fire-pot with a blazing torch (symbolizing the presence of God) passing between the pieces of the slaughtered animals. This is a vivid sign of assurance that God's declaration of "I give this land to you and your offspring" shall definitely be fulfilled.

**THE HOLY GOSPEL      ST. MATTHEW 15:21–28 (NKJV)**

Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed.”

But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, “Send her away, for she cries out after us.”

But He answered and said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, “Lord, help me!”

But He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.”

And she said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.”

Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

**THE COLLECT**

O God, who seest that of ourselves we have no strength, keep us both outwardly and inwardly that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Today’s text has an interesting progression of events. In the heat of the day Abraham is resting, perhaps napping. He is stirred by the appearance of three figures standing in front of him. First, he is startled by having company at such an odd time. Then he recognizes these are not your everyday passers-by. We know this from Abraham’s greeting: “So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, and said, ‘My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant.’” Abraham begged them to stay for a meal, which they did.

Abraham was surprised, yet delighted, that His Lord would come to visit him--and even condescend to share a meal with him. More was added to this momentous day when God promised him a return visit--and the miraculous gift of a son. Yet Sarah’s laughter reflected her unbelief at God’s promise. Was it all too good to be true?

We are no less blessed today. Our Lord visits us repeatedly in His Means of Grace and shares a meal with us in His Supper. He promises to return to us whenever His Word is faithfully preached and His Sacraments rightly administered. Are we rightfully prepared to receive such bounty, or are we prone to laugh it off as Sarah did? May we be granted a clean heart every Lord’s Day to receive His presence and His gifts with an attitude of faith, joy, and gratitude.