

THE THREE "SOLAS."

What does it mean to sing a solo? It means that you sing the song all by yourself. If you were taking flying lessons and flew solo, that means you went up in the airplane all by yourself without an instructor with you. Solo comes from the Latin and it means alone. You can't think of Reformation without thinking of the three "solas:" sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura. These are Latin phrases and mean, "by grace *alone*, by faith *alone*, by scripture *alone*. The emphasis here is "alone." Today we will contemplate these three solas and what they mean in our lives. First we look at sola gratia, by grace alone.

I. *By Grace alone.*

"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."
(Ephesians 2:1-10).

There is an old story that comes from the days of the Reformation. It involves a girl whose father was a printer. For all her life this girl pictured God like some big vulture sitting on the branch ready to pounce on anyone who committed a sin. Thus she lived in fear of God. Then one day, while in her father's print shop, she noticed a piece of paper crumpled up on the floor. Curiously she read it and immediately felt a big weight come off her shoulders. What did the paper say? It contained a passage from John 3, "***God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son . . .***" She no longer viewed God like a vulture but like a mother who would sacrifice anything for her children.

How do you view God? Is he vulture ready to pounce on your next sin? In the text above we are reminded that we were dead in our sins and transgressions, we were disobedient to God, we were objects of God's wrath. God should be a vulture.

But the text continues. "***But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.***" Note all the important love words in the text: God's great love; rich in mercy; twice it states that it is by grace we have been saved.

God is a God of justice who should punish sins, but he is also a God of grace who doesn't want us to be punished. Usually, you can't have both. One will have to step aside and let the other win. But God found a way to satisfy both: Christ. Let him die for our sins to satisfy God's justice. Let him die for our sins so God gets what he wants, to save us.

So it is by grace we are saved, grace alone. If it wasn't grace alone, then it means that our salvation would also depend on us. We were dead in sins and transgressions. A dead bird stands a better chance singing a beautiful song than we have in convincing God we sinners should be in heaven.

So God doesn't make it depend on us, not even one tenth of one percent. He saves us because of who he is, a gracious and merciful Father. That is why we find refuge and security in God as we acknowledge with the singing of psalm 46.

II. *By Faith alone.*

The second sola is sola fide, by faith alone.

"Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law." (Romans 3:19-28)

Can you imagine if you checked with your bank to see how much money you have in your checking account, and they didn't know? It could be \$200.00 or \$2,000.00. You would live in fear. You'd be afraid to use your debit card or to write any checks because you may become overdrawn and at \$35 a crack, it can be expensive.

Can you imagine if God sent you a notice saying, "I don't know if you are going to heaven or not." You will be living in fear. Just as bad, imagine if God said that only nice people will get to heaven. You would always wonder if you were nice enough. But God takes all doubt away. Not nice enough? Don't worry, Jesus was perfectly nice all the time for you. What about the sins you committed? Don't worry, Jesus paid for them with his own death on the cross. ***"There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood."*** If God would send daily statements of your account, it will always read, "going to heaven." God gives heaven to you as a gift.

To show that this is totally a gift from God, all of this becomes ours through faith. And don't forget to say, faith alone. Let's just say that God said, "I will forgive you and give you heaven if you do twenty jumping jacks a day." Sounds good, doesn't it, but what if you broke your leg and ended up in a wheel chair. I guess you can't be saved because you can't do jumping jacks. God doesn't want you to miss out on heaven, so he takes what Christ does—his perfect life, his innocent death on the cross, his payment for your sins—and he found the perfect way to give it to you: by faith alone. It doesn't depend on your IQ or who your parents are; it doesn't matter if you are a newborn baby or suffer from dementia; it is through faith alone. ***"Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."*** Believe this, and you will be built on the Rock of Christ as we acknowledge in our next hymn.

III. *By Scripture alone.*

Now we come to our third sola, sola Scriptura or by Scripture alone.

"To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' They answered him, 'We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?' Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.'" (John 8:31-36)

You heard of this riddle. If a tree falls down in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a noise? My answer would be, "Of course it does," but someone would shoot back, "How do we know if someone isn't there to hear it?"

If Christ died for the sins of the world, but no one hears it, are they saved? No. But someone may shoot back, "But didn't Jesus die to pay for sins, and if sins are paid for, then everyone should go to heaven if they believe or not." Yes, Jesus died for the sins of the world, but not everyone benefits from it. Let's say I buy a gift for you, a really nice gift. But let's say I never give it to you. Or I gave it to you, but for some reason you never opened it. It is still your gift, but you don't benefit from it; it would be as if you never had a gift. If Christ died for your sins, but you don't believe, do you benefit from it? No. And if you don't hear about it, how can you believe?

That is what confronted Jesus in this reading. So many people of his day didn't really know who he was, but they were convinced they were going to heaven because they were descendants of Abraham. Jesus had to tell them the truth. Even Abraham's descendants are still slaves to sin. But there is a way they can be free, and it comes to them through the Bible.

It is there alone where we meet Christ and understand who he is. It is there we learn, and believe, that God has paid our debt. That means we will not find this freedom from philosophy or editorial pages. In fact, if we try to introduce some of man's thoughts, theories, and ideas, we water down the Bible to where we don't even know what it says. Yes, Jesus is not very inclusive here. We must hold to his teachings, and his teachings alone. It may be the only way, but it is the only way. And we find that way by Scripture alone.

So there you have it. The three solas. They are like three legs on a three-legged stool. Take one away, and you can't sit on the stool. Take away by grace alone, and God would never have been moved to send Jesus to save us. Take away by faith alone, and this gift of Christ would never become ours. And take away by Scripture alone, and we would never know what Jesus did for us and never benefit from it. The church stands on these three solas. Let's not find an excuse to change it.

Let's now stand make a confession of our Christian faith with the words of the Nicene Creed.