

Romans 16:25-27. Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past,²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him— ²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Praise God for His Gift of Faith!

1. It is a gift given through Word and Sacrament

2. It is a gift given so that we may believe the impossible.

3. It is a gift given so that we may worship our God forever.

It is a story that captures the imagination of children and adults alike. It is a story that seems to be shrouded in mystery and fantasy. It's a story that seems so impossible. And yet, by faith, we know it's true. An angel of the Lord appeared to a young woman, a virgin, named Mary and announced to her that the impossible would happen. ***³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.*** How could this be? The angel answered with words that are recorded for us in the pages of Scripture. ***"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God."***

I suppose that if this story is written anywhere else, we might believe it as children but then later pass it off as nothing more than mere childhood fantasy. We might lump it into the same category as other Christmas myths and legends. But we don't. By faith we believe that this promise was given and this promise came true. We believe that Jesus is the Son of God born of the virgin Mary. Why is that? Why is it that we believe these words? Why is it that we believe such things as a virgin birth and an angel who suddenly appears to a peasant girl and tells her that this impossible thing is going to happen? Why do we still today, living in this world that can be so harshly rational and coldly cynical, believe that the Son of God was born in a lowly cattle shed and that he was born to be our Savior? How can this be?

Praise God for his Gift of Faith!

The apostle Paul makes a habit out of praising God for this miracle of faith and pointing us to the means by which this faith is created. In this book of Romans he begins by confessing his confidence in the power of the gospel. ***I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe (Romans 1:16).*** In this same book he speaks of faith which ***comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17).*** And as he concludes this masterpiece of doctrine, this beautiful dissertation and exposition of sin and grace, Paul writes these words of praise to our gracious God. ***Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ... to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.***

In the book of Romans Paul often lays out the argument for salvation through Jesus Christ alone. He speaks in an orderly way. He debunks different ways to be saved. ***For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... (Romans 3)*** He lays out clearly how we are saved freely by the goodness of God in Christ Jesus. ***The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus.... (Romans 6)*** He makes a compelling case for God's grace; but in the end he knows that spiritual things are above mere rational decision produced by a sound argument. Paul understands that it is God who grants us the gift of faith through the power of the word. And so Paul writes, ***Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past,²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—*** God is to receive the glory and the credit for calling anyone to faith. It is through the words of the prophets revealed in Christ Jesus, it is the word given at the command of the eternal God and the Holy Spirit working through that word and the sacraments which brings us, and establishes us, and keeps us in the faith. It is through God's gift of faith that people from all around the world are saved.

And so at the end of the book of Romans as he does in the beginning (and throughout the entire letter really) Paul recognizes the wonderful miracle of faith and praises God up and down for his goodness. Praise God for his gift of faith! This is how God in his wisdom chose to save us. Only by God's goodness and grace in Christ Jesus could we be saved. Only by the gift of the Spirit working through the means of the grace, gospel in word and sacrament, can we believe and trust in the impossibly good news of Jesus. And it is only by the mysterious grace of God that God would come into this world as a child to fulfill the promises of old, proclaim the good news as a man, and earn our salvation with a perfect life and incredible sacrifice. It is only by God's remarkable grace that he would rise from the dead and

then commission his followers to share this message with the world, so that it might reach your hearts. This is the gospel, the proclamation about Jesus Christ, which saves us. This is the mysterious means, the powerful gospel, which is the only thing that saves. The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Praise God for his gift of faith!

We don't just wake up some day and decide to follow Jesus. This is a gift of God. It is the gift of faith! We don't just wake up one day and say that I am going to believe in the virgin birth, I am going to believe that God's son came into this world to save me a poor miserable creature. We don't just wake up one day and say, "That makes sense, I will believe that."

We don't do that, because it doesn't make sense; rather the gospel very much goes against our rational thinking. Reason is a tremendous gift of God, but when applied to spiritual matters it can be a roadblock that keeps people from believing God. Reason can be a dangerous ally of the devil leading us away from God. Martin Luther once wrote, "Faith must trample under foot all reason, sense, and understanding." The prophet Isaiah, who lived around 700 BC foretold this would happen in his day and in ours. The prophet describes the problem of reason verses faith in our Savior as, ***a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall***. Left to our own devices, left to look at salvation only through the eyes of reason, we would never get it. We wouldn't understand. We would let go of our faith and dismiss all of this as fable and childhood fantasy, because we can't rationally see or understand how this could work. And so without the gift of faith, without our gracious God establishing us and keeping us in the faith, we couldn't overcome the trouble of reason, and we couldn't be saved. But by God's goodness and grace he creates and establishes and maintains that saving childlike faith through his powerful gospel.

Throughout his writings, in one way or another, Paul speaks of the foolishness of God that God in his wisdom chose to shame the wise. God in his eternal wisdom purposefully established the way to salvation in a way so that man cannot save himself or figure out or navigate his own way to salvation. Instead Paul often speaks of the saving mysteries of God which can only be revealed in Christ. In his wisdom God did not establish the way to salvation in a way that could only be figured out or understood and mastered by a pious few, instead he freely gives salvation to all who believe through his marvelous, miraculous, gift of faith. In his goodness he does this so that remarkable grace, and his fantastic love in Christ. He saves us through these mysteries revealed in Christ that we couldn't make up if we tried, so that whoever believes in Jesus will be saved, or as he writes, ***so that all nations might believe and obey him... to God be the glory forever and ever.***

In his writings Paul speaks of the gospel as the mysteries of God revealed in Christ and he often pairs this with a warning to watch out for those who would try to persuade the rational mind to abandon these mysteries as mere fantasy and fiction. We are to watch out for false teachers who try to convince us with smooth talk and well put together and rational arguments. But we are also to watch out for ourselves. Being Christians doesn't mean that rational part of our minds just suddenly shuts off and stops working. And so naturally there are times where doubt may creep in. The devil might use our reason to struggle and fight to strangle our faith and drag us into doubt, skepticism, and finally unbelief. But the Lord who established us in the faith promises to keep us firmly in the faith. He encourages us to trust in the Lord and lean not on your own understanding. The God of peace and faith promises to crush Satan under your feet. And God will be with us. Our Emmanuel will be there to help us fight against ourselves and against the devil. The Lord God will be there to help us fight against the sinful world, which begs us to dismiss anything that goes against plain reason.

In our world today it is unfortunately becoming a more regular occurrence that you will see a sign, or a bumper sticker, or an editorial around Christmas time that promotes an anti-Christmas, anti-faith sentiment. It might include quotes from famous figures who say things like, "Religions are all alike – founded on fables and mythologies." Such signs and stickers might argue to let reason prevail. But through his powerful word the God who has established us in the faith will keep us in the faith. In this wonderful letter to the Romans Paul speaks to this point as well. Romans 9:33. ***"See I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, but the one who trust in him will never be put to shame."***

Praise God for his gift of faith! Unashamed we believe in Christmas! The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son. He will be the Son of the Most High. He will be named Jesus. He will save the people from their sins. This is more than a Christmas bedtime story. This is more than the plot of an unbelievable children's movie. This is how God in his wisdom chose to save us. He chose to save us in a way that we would need to wholly lean on him and trust in him.

Through God's gift of faith we proudly confess our faith in this miraculous Christmas promise and all the mysteries that are revealed in Christ. He was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered in our place, crucified, died, and rose again. He did all of this to save us and now he sits in heaven and one day he will come to take those who believe in him to our eternal home in heaven. Praise God for his gift of faith! To the only wise God be glory forever and ever through Jesus Christ. Amen!