



St John Lutheran Church

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Luke 23: 1-49

Assurance of Salvation

In 1930, a Lutheran pastor and professor named John Michael Reu published an essay entitled, "**What is Lutheranism?**" **Reu wrote this** essay because he had been asked to identify the one thing that makes Lutherans different among all the denominations that bear the name Christian. **What is it** that is unique about us? **What can people** find here that they will not necessarily find in any other church body?

Reu provided a one-word answer to the question... **Assurance.** "**Assurance of salvation,**" he writes, "**assurance of communion with God is to this day the distinctive characteristic of the Lutheran Church**" (What is Lutheranism, ed. Vergilius Ferm, New York: MacMillan, 1930, p. 105). **All of the other** mainline denominations of the Christian Church place some kind of condition on salvation. **Whether it is** making a decision for Jesus...**or asking** Jesus into your heart...**or outright** teaching concerning good works that one must do to become worthy of salvation...**or the** teaching of limited atonement, which claims that Jesus died for only a few and not for all people. **There is always** some condition...**some blurring** of the Gospel which masks the assurance of Grace...**the free** gift of salvation in Christ!

And then there are those so-called "**modern**" Church bodies who have so blatantly thrown away the clear teachings of God's Word. **When they hear** what the Bible has to say about creation... **or ordination ...or sexuality ...or abortion ...or any** number of other things... **they reject** those clear teachings of the Bible ...**they throw** away everything else they do not like about God's Word. **How, then could** any hearer feel certain that the teachings of such a church body are truly from God? **If you tell** me that the Bible is not true when it forbids homosexuality and other such things... **how can I** believe you when you point to the Bible and tell me that my sins are forgiven? **How can I** trust what you teach if you pick and choose what is true and what is not in God's Word? **If you pick** and choose what you want me to believe?

Please...please understand...**this is** not to say that there are no Christians in any other Church bodies. **There most certainly** are Christians in all the denominations. **John Michael Reu** did not make that arrogant claim that there aren't... **and most** of you know me too well to think that I would say such a thing. **You have never** heard me make such a claim and you never will. **Reu does not** speak about individual Christians...**those who sit in** the pew... **but speaks** about church bodies as a whole... **and about** the content of their **public teaching.** **The point of** Reu's essay is that no other church body offers the sinner the concrete assurances that will allow him to be certain of his salvation by Christ. **There is always ...always...some kind** of condition laid upon you...

some requirement that you must first fulfill before salvation can be bestowed... **and when** such demands are made... **certainty then flies out the window.**

"Assurance of salvation," writes John Michael Reu, **"assurance of communion with God is to this day the distinctive characteristic of the Lutheran Church"** The crazy thing about this statement...as true as it is... **the one** thing that makes us unique in the Church is the one thing that we ought to have in common with every denomination... **every church** body... **every congregation** on the planet! **"Certainty"**... **"assurance"**... **is not** a special Lutheran requirement that comes along as an extra to the Bible... **but certainty** is the very message **of the Scriptures!** **Certainty and assurance** is what Scripture is all about! **When you become** a member of a Lutheran congregation... **you are not told,** **"Okay, you have to believe everything the Bible tells you, and you also have to believe this extra, Lutheran idea...that your salvation is beyond all question and doubt."** **That is not** what you are told!

Assurance of salvation ought to be the characteristic of every church body in the world... **because assurance of salvation is the characteristic** of God's Word, the Bible. **God wants us to be confident and sure!** **Without the removal** of doubt... **you really** have no freedom from your sins (John 8:36). **Without the realization** God's Word of forgiveness and grace **truly includes you personally...** **you have** nothing other than fear of judgment and the hatred of God. **Without the assurance** of your salvation... **nothing else** God says to you really matters...**because nothing** else means anything for your eternal future.

"Assurance of salvation. is to this day the distinctive characteristic of the Lutheran Church." **As true** as this statement is... **let's revise** it just a bit... **and make** from it another... **equally true** statement: **"Assurance of salvation. is to this day the distinctive characteristic of the Holy Scriptures of God."** **This is why** the heaven-sent Messiah carries the name Jesus, which means, **"the Lord Saves."** **This is why** John the Baptist called Him **"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"** (John 1:29). **This is why** the apostle John declares that Jesus is **"the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but for the sins of the whole world"** (1 John 2:2). **This is why** God promised Abraham... **our Lord's** ancestor in the flesh, that not just a few, **but "all nations will be blessed through him"** (Genesis 18:18).

"Assurance of salvation. is to this day the distinctive characteristic of the Holy Scriptures of God." **Matthew, Mark, Luke and John...** **all four** of the Gospel writers realized this. **In their reports** of what happened to Jesus during His trial... **each Gospel** writer includes an important feature that speaks assurance to you... **and that** feature is the repugnant, vile creature named Barabbas.

"With one voice [the rabble] cried out, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!" (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.) **Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"** **So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will"** (Luke 23:18-20, 24-25).

Do you see what has happened? **Barabbas was a** condemned prisoner... **doomed to die** because of his many sins. **Yet when Jesus** appeared before the judge... **He ended up** taking Barabbas' place. **It is as if** Pilate said to Barabbas, "**You have committed many crimes, but now I judge you 'not guilty' and I set you free because this innocent man Jesus is going to suffer and die instead of you.**" **That is what** happened there that day so long ago!

Barabbas did not need to wonder whether or not he wanted this release from bondage and death. **He rushed to** receive it! **He was not** required first to ask Jesus to do this thing for him... **but Jesus** presented Himself to Pilate without Barabbas' request or permission. **Barabbas did not** make a decision for Jesus ...**or even** confess Jesus to be the Lord...**Barabbas goes free... he is** acquitted of every sin and every crime... **purely because** Jesus came to bear the penalty for him. **Were it not** for Jesus...**Barabbas would** have died that day!

History knows nothing more of Barabbas than the fact that "[Pilate] **released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one [the people] asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will**" (Luke 23:25). **And none of** the Gospel writers ever indicate whether or not Barabbas believed in Jesus. **This is what** creates the foundation for your certainty. **This is what** makes you able to believe and not doubt... **even for a minute** that Jesus truly died for you and forgives you all your sins. **This verse speaks** the assurance of your salvation: "[Pilate] **released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder and surrendered Jesus to their will**" (Luke 23:25).

Barabbas is Every man...he is John Q. Public... **the living** representative of every person in creation. **Jesus dies for** Barabbas whether Barabbas believes it or not. **Jesus dies for** the sins of the whole world ...**whether the** world believes it or not. **Jesus sheds His** blood and covers over every sin of **every man, woman and child** in all of the world's history. **And your are** in that history... **so you** may be certain that Jesus truly shed His blood and died for your sins as well.

It is not that you can look at Barabbas and say to yourself, "**Gee, he is much more of a sinner than I could ever be!**" **Barabbas truly was** miserable in every way... **the sum** total of every sin that God so deeply hates. **But St. James** and all the other writers of the Scriptures will not allow you to think of yourself as better than Barabbas... **for he writes...** "**Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it**" (James 2:10). **That is to say...** **if you** ever have broken a single syllable of God's commands in even the smallest way... **God regards you** as being just as great a sinner as this mangy...**foul fellow** Barabbas "**who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder**" (Luke 23:25).

So you don't look at Barabbas to see that you are less of a sinner than he... **and therefore** you are more deserving than he of being saved. **You look at** Barabbas and see that **Jesus takes your place** in suffering and in death **just as surely as He took Barabbas' place.**

Can you imagine how insane Barabbas would have seemed if Pilate had said to him, "**Go, you are free. Jesus is going to die in your place**" and Barabbas responded, "**Uh, no thanks. I don't believe that Jesus would do such a thing. I would rather stay here in my sins and die myself!**" **And yet isn't** this the insanity of all unbelief?

Far better that Barabbas say, "I am free because Jesus died in my place. I added nothing to the whole event. He appeared without my expectation or my prayer, He saved me from death, and now I live because of what He did for me." The same confession of faith is now yours... by the miracle of God...faith IS God's Work!

This is the same conclusion that John Michael Reu draws in his essay from 1930. **He does not** conclude that the distinctive characteristic of the Lutheran Church is something special that we have dreamed up and that no one else and thought of. **Rather, he concludes** that the distinctive characteristic we possess is that which God Himself has given through His powerful and merciful Word:

"Christ procured salvation fully and completely, so that we need contribute nothing toward it even if we had the strength or will to do so [which we do not]. All our good works, of whatever nature they may be, are neither required or effective. What an immovable and eternal foundation for our salvation! God Himself has procured it and holds it in His hand. Since all this is the work of God and not of man, therefore this foundation for the Christian's salvation and his communion with God is absolutely firm and immovable. [you have] absolute assurance concerning [your] salvation."

Or, to state it in another way... The Bible says that you and I Both owed a debt of sin... Because of all we say and do... And evil thoughts within.

But Jesus Christ gave up His life In death upon a cross in a most painful and hideous death... **Just as He** took Barabbas's place... **Christ also set US free. You, like Barabbas,** have God's gift Of freedom from your sin...**And Jesus rose,** so now you'll live Eternally with Him! In the Name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit...Amen

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