

## God's Word Is Near You

Romans 10:8b-13

by Michael G. Lilienthal

Dear fellow redeemed,

Hear what God's Word says, for it is indeed near you: "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart." What the Holy Spirit is leading St. Paul to prove to the Romans and to us is that righteousness, salvation, and faith are not difficult. He said, "For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them" (Rom. 10:5).

You know the Ten Commandments; turn in your *Hymnaries* to p. 31 and follow along in the *Small Catechism*, peruse the meanings of the commandments and refresh your memory of them: **1.** "You shall have no other gods." **2.** "You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain." **3.** "You shall keep the day of rest holy." **4.** "Honor your father and your mother, that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth." **5.** "You shall not kill." **6.** "You shall not commit adultery." **7.** "You shall not steal." **8.** "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." **9.** "You shall not covet your neighbor's house." **10.** "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his cattle, nor anything that is his." A long list. Have you kept them? Now turn to p. 32: "What does God say about these commandments? I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, and showing mercy to thousands of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

What does this mean? God threatens to punish all who transgress these commandments. Therefore we should fear His wrath and do nothing against these commandments. But he promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore we should also love and trust in Him and willingly do according to His commandments." Are you comforted now? If you can keep everything God has commanded without a single slip into the temptations of the Devil, then be comforted. But I know for a fact that not a single one of you leads a perfect life. Therefore, according to these commandments, you are subject to God's wrath.

And yet here is the comfort: Paul further wrote under the direction of the Holy Spirit, "But the righteousness based on faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) or "'Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart'" (Rom. 10:6-8). To be saved, he says, we do not need to climb into heaven or venture deep into death's realm – we need to accomplish nothing, he says, because it is already done. Who went up to heaven to bring Christ down? He came willingly. Who went into death to raise Christ up? He raised himself by his divine power. Since Christ has done it all, the word of God in our confession and faith saves us: this is what it means that **God's Word is near you**.

### I. Christ Who Came

St. John in his inspired Gospel describes Jesus as "the Word": "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son

from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14). This is God's self-revelation; we see God because he came in the flesh. Because Jesus became incarnate, salvation is not hard, as it is under the Law: now Christ, God's self-revelation, has brought salvation to us – what is left for us to do but trust in God as he has revealed himself: call on the name of Yahweh Christ!

How did he do it? Various storytellers have latched onto the idea of a great cosmic battle between Good and Evil, or between God and the Devil. Think in those terms for just a moment. Jesus Christ, God as Man, came down onto earth, the central battlefield of this cosmic war, as the Champion of Good. He battled Satan throughout his life – *and he defeated him in every way.*

In our Gospel for today we read how "for forty days [Jesus was] tempted by the devil" (Luke 4:2). Three famous temptations faced Jesus, a rising battery of the Devil's greatest attacks, and Jesus parried each and every one, rebuffing Satan with the Word of God: "It is written...It is written...It is said," using that Sword of the Spirit to cast the devil away.

Facing his death, Jesus assured his disciples, "For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors[' (Is. 53:12).] For what is written about me has its fulfillment" (Luke 22:37). To fulfill the Word of God, Jesus came, and among that Word was the promise that the Savior would crush the head of the serpent, Satan. And so when Jesus died, "calling out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!'" (Luke 23:46). He defeated Satan in the battle, and was rewarded by his soul returning to his Father's arms in heaven.

After three days, Jesus' soul returned to his body, and "he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison," descending into hell (1 Pet. 3:19). In Shakespeare's *King Henry V*, the victorious English king, after the final battle was won, went into the castle of his enemy, the French king, to proclaim his victory there and to demand the spoils of war. This is what Jesus did in hell. He had won the victory on the cross, and so descended into the Devil's domain to speak words of his victory and demand the spoils.

But he didn't land his final blow on Satan just yet. He rose from the dead bodily and came out of the tomb. When angels appeared to the women they told them, "'Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember [what] he told you, while he was in Galilee....' And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest" (Luke 24:5-6, 8). Then Jesus himself began appearing and telling his followers, publicly, about his victory, saying things like, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (Luke 24:46-47).

## **II. Salvation for All Who Call on Him**

It is in this way that Jesus' victory – in every way! – proclaimed through the Word of God from start to finish, mind you, and proclaimed again fully by Jesus himself, has become our victory: and Jesus' proclamation is our proclamation. Jesus himself came down from heaven into the flesh as the Word of God, and he himself came up from the grave in the spirit as that same Word of God, and that, through the mouths of others (pastors, teachers, parents, friends), that Word comes to us, in the form of the

Scriptures. Therefore Paul writes, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord" (the Word who is God), "and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead" (for he had to die and rise from the dead) "you will be saved."

God sends us this Word as a life-preserver – you know those round tubes that float on the water, that you have on ships in case someone falls overboard? Mankind fell into sin; we fell overboard, and immediately began to sink. But God had a plan for salvation in place, and he throws us the life-preserver of his Word. Now, his aim never misses: he is almighty God, and he wants desperately to save us. Nevertheless, sinful flesh rejects such saving. We bat the preserver away. Either we don't want to get back onto the boat, because it looks monstrous and terrifying and confining, or we want to manage our own way up. But of course, on our own, this means we sink under the waves and drown. Therefore God's Son dove into the water after us with that life-preserver, grabbed onto our writhing, hateful bodies, and tied us to it. In fact, he sends his Holy Spirit to bring that salvation to each and every drowning person, because "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord'" (as we must confess) "except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). Elsewhere God's Word tells us, "To this he called you through our gospel" (2 Thess. 2:14). We hear again of this salvation: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). If we read further in our Epistle Lesson, we see, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17).

The Holy Spirit brings personally to us the life-preserver of Christ's work, through the Word of God, and gives us faith, which is the means of holding onto that

salvation. And so faith does hold to it. But do not be deceived into thinking that faith is just a matter of the heart: faith must be in the heart and in the mouth. We *are* saved already because of the faith that has been placed into our hearts, but faith cannot remain silent. God caused St. Paul also to write, "Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we also believe, and so we speak" (2 Cor. 4:13). This is what faith must do. Just like what Jesus said, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). Whatever is in the heart will come through the mouth. So, "with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." Don't think of these as two distinct things. They are two sides of one coin. We *are* saved because of the faith in our hearts. When we leave this earth, we *shall be* saved, brought into eternal joy, if that faith has been allowed to flourish like a plant.

What does a plant need? Water and sunlight and soil and air. Faith is a similar living thing that needs similar things. It cannot be bottled up, shut in a dark closet, hung on a dry rack, or stuffed in a bag. Faith needs the waters of Baptism, the food of the Supper, the enlightenment of the Word, and air to breathe – not just in, but *out*, with confession. *Our* faith, you see, is a mirror of Christ's life. As Jesus was tempted 40 days in the wilderness, we march through a 40-day season of Lent calling attention to our own temptations and our failure to resist it, relying instead on Christ's success and victory. As Christ died and rose again, "all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death[, and we] were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the

Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3-4). Just as Jesus proclaimed his victory to Satan in hell, to mankind on earth, and to the angels in heaven after his ascension, "as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26), and "with the mouth one confesses and is saved."

This is why we have the Creed – three of them used by the entire Christian Church, in fact. The Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed (as we'll confess today), and the Athanasian Creed, which we confess on certain festival days. Turn to p. 32 in your *Hymnaries* once more. You'll find the "Creed" listed on that page in the *Small Catechism*, all three articles and their meanings. Confess them with me now:

#### **THE FIRST ARTICLE**

**I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.**

*What does this mean?*

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them; that He richly and daily provides me with food and clothing, home and family, property and goods, and all that I need to support this body and life; that He protects me from all danger, guards and keeps me from all evil; and all this purely out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which I am in duty bound to thank and praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

#### **THE SECOND ARTICLE**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell; The third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From there He shall come to judge the living and the dead.**

*What does this mean?*

I believe that Jesus Christ is true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary; and that He is my Lord, Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil; not

with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood, and with His innocent suffering and death; in order that I might be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness; even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

### THE THIRD ARTICLE

**I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints, the Forgiveness of sins, the Resurrection of the body, and the Life ☩ everlasting. Amen.**

*What does this mean?*

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; just as He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives me and all believers all our sins; and at the last day He will raise up me and all the dead, and will grant me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.

There is a distinction to be found between the saved and the damned: those who don't believe these things in their hearts or confess them with their mouth succumb to Satan's temptations and fall into his kingdom (which is already overthrown). Those who do believe these things are saved. And *all* who believe and confess these things are equally saved: "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek," even the Jews who believed they could be saved by the Law are under the Gospel, "for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'"

Know the commandments, for then we know how we need salvation. But then know and believe – and not just believe but *confess aloud* – the Creeds of our faith, for then we know how we *have* salvation. This is the Word of God, which is given to you.

Amen.