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“The darkest doctrine?” Romans 7:14-25a.

“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So, I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Perhaps, we can call it the darkest of doctrines. That would be true. Nevertheless, unless we get this darkest of doctrines right, unless we understand it, we will never know the true light and joy of the Gospel. That is also true.

During the Lutheran Reformation, there was this one teaching which was considered the doctrine on which the Church stands or falls. Meaning, if we got that one right, the Church would stand and flourish, if we didn't get it right, God's life-giving message would be distorted and corrupt.

That teaching was the teaching on justification. Article IV in the Augsburg Confession. The very Gospel that we are on good terms with the Triune God only because of His gracious attitude, not because of something good in us.

That we can enjoy His gracious attitude and forgiveness of all our sins only because of what Christ has done for us. And that we receive God's gifts of forgiveness and life eternal only by faith, trusting God's promises, not thanks to something we have accomplished.

In short – grace alone, Christ alone, faith alone.

This message was considered, and rightly so, to be the very foundation of the Church. It is the key that opens for us the Scripture. However, that foundation would not hold together without that darkest of doctrines. Without it even the teaching on justification would fall apart. This sounds impressively serious, doesn't it?

To say more, without this darkest of doctrines we cannot understand what our situation is and what our problem is. We cannot understand God's grace and salvation. Without it we cannot recognize how different Christian faith is compared with every other worldview. If we don't know this doctrine, we struggle to even think as Christians. So much at stake.

Can you guess which Biblical doctrine we are referring to? You guessed it right if you thought about the doctrine of sin. Yes, the Biblical teaching on sin! It could be called the darkest of doctrines, but... there is no true light of the Gospel without the doctrine of sin.

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How so, you may wonder. We can't possibly cover every connection in one sermon, but we can start with these three. **First, how this doctrine changes the very baseline, the starting point** of our perception and thinking. How it helps us to understand our situation, and how it makes it clear how different the Biblical understanding of our reality is from every other worldview and even from teachings of many Christian traditions.

Second, how this darkest of doctrines elevates God's grace and helps us to rejoice in the Gospel of forgiveness. Finally, how without understanding this doctrine, **we cannot even have a proper Christian outlook on our lives.** Put harshly, without understanding it, our thinking will still be more shaped by the world than by the Word of God and His Spirit.

Okay, first, baseline. Our perception of our situation and of this world generally. How do we naturally perceive it? There certainly is a consensus that something is wrong with this world and with humanity. But usually, it is a very superficial assessment.

As if we could explain everything with our bad choices. The world being a neutral place and those being our conscious bad choices that make things worse. Some believe it's the lack of education to be blamed. Others, that the problem is unequal distribution of wealth. Yet for others the explanation is cultural oppression, or evil patriarchy, or suppression of our sexual desires, and so on. What they all share is the conviction that the problem is somewhere out there, and if everything is going well, we could fix it.

The Biblical doctrine of sin has something very different to say about it. And it is dark. **"The intention of man's heart is evil from his youth."** [Genesis 8:21] **"I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."** And the problem is not restricted to humanity alone. **"We know that the whole creation has been groaning [...] in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption..."** [Romans 8:20-21]

We are all so deeply entangled in this world. There is no escape. There is nothing that hasn't been corrupted by sin. There is nothing that works as it is supposed to. This world cannot be fixed. It must be completely cleansed and renewed.

Once we recognize this, we have our answers to questions like: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" For there are no good people. We are all corrupted by sin, and we inhabit a world which is corrupted by sin and doesn't function properly.

"Why do bad things happen to Christians?" Tragedies. Loss of loved ones. Terminal illnesses. Terrible injustices. Breakdown of relationships. And so on. Why? For we are still in this world. Even when gracious God creates new hearts in us, we cannot just shed our old sinful nature. We cannot extract ourselves from this corrupt world.

Our bodies still carry their sinful corruption, seeds of bodily ailments. Our souls are still scarred and prone to temptations. We still live among human beings, all of us sinful and selfish to our core. We still walk in this world torn apart by greed and envy and more.

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As Paul cried out: **“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”** And even as the good Lord helps us to get our lives together, and sometimes quite miraculously, He doesn’t take us out of this world. Not yet. That is how the Biblical doctrine of sin gives us a different baseline for how to perceive this world.

Not wondering why occasionally bad things happen, but being surprised daily by the countless number of good things that the Lord brings forth despite the fallen state of this world. That is how we are to see ourselves and this world.

And only when we get this, we can begin to appreciate God’s incredible grace. That’s our second topic. Now remember: **“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”** [Romans 3:10-12] And: **“You were dead in the trespasses and sins [...] following the prince of the power of the air.”** [Eph 2:1-2] **“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. [...] For while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son...”** [Romans 5:8-10]

Before gracious God comes to us and calls us to Himself, we are dead in our sins, we are not neutral, we are His enemies, no one seeks God, not one! It is always the Triune God who comes looking for us. He walks among the dead and breathes new life in us.

Without the Biblical doctrine of sin, we may daydream that we are somehow capable of seeking for the true God. That we may be able to find Him, traveling one of the many spiritual pathways towards the summit of that proverbial mountain. But before God speaks to us, we are spiritually dead, and the dead don’t travel searching for God.

Besides, the Biblical doctrine of sin reveals the unpleasant reality of the presence of false teachings in many Christian traditions. Where sin is perceived only as something questionable that we occasionally do and where we can triumph over it.

The Biblical doctrine of sin makes it clear that it is God’s grace and love that drives Him to rescue you, that we, being spiritually dead, cannot decide to follow Him. That there is no escape from our fallen state or healing of our sinfulness in this age.

As you can see, if we don’t understand what our situation really is, we can’t really appreciate God’s grace. If our sin was only smoking and drinking and sexing, then, sure, we could somewhat overcome it. We could stop sinning and become good people.

But we cannot. It is Him, your Father in heaven, your Brother Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who out of their divine love have given you a new birth, new life, not because you wanted it or deserved it, but because this God loves you more than you can imagine.

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Only the Biblical doctrine of sin helps to hear the Good News in full force. That while you were dead in sin, with greater potential for evil than you know, the Triune God came to you sacrificing Himself, He baptized you into His family, He embraced you and keeps you in the true faith by feeding you in this Holy Meal until the day when you see Him face-to-face.

Which leads to our last topic for reflection.

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Without the Biblical doctrine of sin, we can't really have a proper Christian mindset. How so? You may have witnessed or you may have had this mindset yourselves, that if you are a Christian then God will bless you and you will have a good life. A good life... but according to what criteria? Usually those are the same criteria that the world uses.

Health and wealth and fulfilment of our dreams and happy life ever after. Or you may have witnessed that when someone doesn't get it, but instead goes through afflictions that really challenge them, they may turn away from God: "Why would I need this God, I served Him and He still let this happen to me?!" Does any of this sound familiar?

The Biblical doctrine of sin helps us to understand not only our situation in this world, but also what counts as truly blessed life and what our hopes should be. Because as Christians we have a different frame of reference, not the one the world uses.

Sure, we acknowledge the gifts of creation as God's blessings. They are good. They make our lives easier. But we also acknowledge that there is no ultimate fulfilment of what our hearts long for in this world. There is no fixing this world. There is no ultimate justice or peace in this age. But we also know that we have all of that promised.

And so much more. When we finally see our Lord Jesus Christ face-to-face. As Christians we are not expecting our God to fix this world, and we are realistic that He cannot just take us out of this fallen world, and we know that there is no life free of suffering to be found here. There is no permanent city for us. We are aliens and strangers in this age, for our true citizenship and our true home is in the age to come.

That shapes how we perceive this life. We look at it from the end, so to speak. From our destination. From New Heavens and Earth, from God's very presence among us. We try to see how God uses everything in our lives to get us there. And we look at it from the cross of Jesus. That is where we see God's unchanging attitude towards us, what He was willing to do for you. These two put together assure us of God's unchanging love, whatever messy our lives may be in this fallen world.

We are assured of Jesus' presence with us, even if the whole hell breaks loose. We are assured that nothing will separate us from God, that nothing will snatch us out of His loving arms, that He is all-mighty and faithful to bring us to be with Him, even if we may feel like the whole world rages against us.

That is what blessed life looks like for us. Faith. Trust. God's presence. Assurance. Hope. That is how we go about our lives. Grateful when pleasant things happen. Trusting when we experience challenges. Always hopeful and certain that whatever happens, our loving Father will use it to bless those who love Him.

Always looking forward to the day when we will leave this fallen world behind and will begin the life for which we are created and redeemed in the most amazing company of this gracious God and all the multitudes of His saints.

As you can see, the darkest of doctrines bring us so much light and joy, which we would not have otherwise. May it fill your life with the most heartwarming Good News of God's undeserved love and faithfulness, with trust and comfort and eternal hope in Jesus' promises. To Him be all glory and honor forever and ever. Amen.