

THE MIGHTY WORD

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and void, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, ‘*Let there be light,*’ and there was light.”

God spoke the universe into existence.

By His word alone He created matter and energy and organized them into planets and stars and galaxies.

Then He created man in His own image and appointed Him to take care of His creation.

But man rebelled against God and struck out on his own.

God knew that the way men had chosen to go would lead them to destruction so out of His love He initiated a plan to draw them back to Him.

Then he imparted His word to certain men and sent them forth to implement that plan.

On such man was born about 1700 years ago in the North African city of Hippo.

God gave him a great intellect and his wealthy parents recognized this and sent him to the University of Carthage, which was the political, economic and cultural center of the Roman Empire in Africa.

At that time, Christianity was a relatively new and flourishing religion, but he had no interest in it.

The Bible seemed to him an inelegant book full of stories about violence and deceit, where the rules of good literary style were seldom followed.

Besides, he wasn't interested in searching for truth—that was the job of philosophers.

He was interested in studying the art of rhetoric or persuasion—and then applying what he learned to dancing ladies in the nightclubs of Carthage.

Soon, however, his studies of classical authors like Cicero and Quintilian convinced him that truth did matter, and he began to study philosophy and religion.

He became a student of a Persian religion called Manichaeism, which taught that all creation was engaged in a war between two irreconcilable forces: light and darkness.

But he soon became dissatisfied with the intellectual shallowness of Manichaean philosophy.

He moved to Rome and then to Milan where he embraced Neoplatonism—another trendy philosophy which was popular at the time among intellectuals in Rome and Milan.

With the support of several wealthy patrons, he secured a prestigious teaching position at the University of Milan.

He led a pleasant and successful life.

Then one day he went to hear a Christian preacher by the name of Ambrose and his life was changed forever.

All of his rhetorical skills and philosophical knowledge were swept away by God's Mighty Word and he committed his life to Jesus Christ.

He went on to become the greatest theologian in the entire history of the Church.

We know him as St. Augustine, and the books he wrote laid the foundations of Christian theology.

Millions of people were drawn back to God because of what he did.

God transformed St. Augustine with His mighty word, and then sent him forth to change the world.

About twelve hundred years later, a young monk in Germany was agonizing over his faith.

All that he could feel from God was judgment and wrath.

He longed to be righteous but when he looked within himself all he could find was sin and depravity.

And guilt, damnable guilt.

The thought of God's perfect righteousness and holiness only increased his agony, because it reminded him of how unrighteous and un-holy he was.

He felt that God was very, very far away from him and despaired of ever achieving the moral perfection that God demanded.

Like St. Paul, he wanted to do good, but all he could think and do was the evil God had forbidden.

Nevertheless, like Jacob, who wrestled with God at the Jabbock River, he refused to let go of God until he received a blessing.

And one day, God came to him just as he had come to Elijah on Mount Horeb in a gentle breeze that followed an earthquake which had shaken the mountain.

Gently, he opened the young monk's mind to words of the O. T. prophet Habakkuk: "The just shall live by faith."

Suddenly he realized that he had become so obsessed with trying to earn God's favor by living a morally perfect life—which he could never do—he had completely missed out on the Good News that "*...it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God...*"

The message had been there in God's Word all along, waiting to be discovered.

The man's name was Martin Luther, and he later wrote that at that instant, the gates of paradise opened up to him and he felt a joy and peace that he had never known before.

Luther's influence upon Western Civilization is enormous, which is why more books have been written about him than about anyone else who has ever lived, apart from the Lord Himself.

Yet toward end of his life he wrote that he himself had done nothing—but that it was God's Word that had done everything.

God transformed Luther with His mighty word and then sent him forth to transform the world.

Two centuries later, a young Englishman was traveling down the road to perdition.

His parents were devout Christians but he had rejected their faith and become a prodigal son.

He became a sailor—the kind of sailor who gives sailors a bad name.

He was a drunkard, a gambler, a whoremonger and a brawler.

He so detested the Christian faith that he would seek out believers and try to argue them out of their faith.

After he had been thrown off his shop for fighting he signed onto a slaver, a British vessel which transported slaves from Africa to America.

While he was aboard the slaver, he routinely abused the captive slaves.

After a quarrel with the captain, he was cast off the ship on the west coast of Africa—the Ivory Coast—where he was immediately captured by the soldiers of a black princess and made to be HER slave.

She kept him in a cage like an animal and treated him cruelly.

He nearly died from starvation, but finally escaped and signed on to a ship bound for England.

While they were at sea, the ship was struck by a violent storm and began to founder.

As the terrified sailors worked furiously to keep the ship from sinking, the young man found himself quite unexpectedly pleading with the Lord to save him from drowning.

The storm subsided, and afterwards he borrowed a Bible from a shipmate.

He began to read it, and by the time the ship reached England, he was a believer.

He went on to become a great Puritan preacher as well as the composer of several hymns, one of which is probably the best known hymn of all time: *Amazing Grace*.

He also became the mentor and confidante of a member of Parliament by the name of William Wilberforce, the man who led the fight to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire.

The man's name was John Newton.

There are words engraved on his tombstone which he himself wrote: "*Here lies John Newton, slave of slaves, who was saved by that Gospel he once labored to destroy.*"

God transformed John Newton through His mighty word and sent him forth to change the world.

Now what can change a person like that?

Can anyone seriously believe that the transformation of men like Augustine, Luther and Newton into forces that changed human history can be attributed simply to chance—or to psychological factors?

That in a weak moment they were taken captive by a novel idea?

That they were simply deluded and passionately attached to their delusions?

These were men who were among the greatest geniuses that the world has known—men who went on to write books like *The City of God* and *The Bondage of the Will*, and compose hymns like *Amazing Grace*—which have been translated into almost every language known to man.

If a person can believe that things like that "just happen," then he is capable of believing anything.

The Mighty Word that created the world transforms the world every day through men like Augustine, Luther and Newton.

Unfortunately, words are cheap to us anymore.

Anyone can say anything and nobody cares if it's true or not.

The plague of postmodernism has been turned loose upon society.

Like all intellectual fads it first infected those who were most susceptible: the intelligentsia of our time who are always receptive to novelties.

Who like the Athenians of Paul's time, "*...spent all their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.*"

One contemporary pundit said about people like that that “the best idea they ever had was the last one they heard.”

It is not difficult for people to become convinced that they have found something new under the sun.

The postmodernists believe that they have discovered a new truth, and this truth is the perfectly self-negating proposition that there is no such thing as objective truth.

There are only subjective perceptions of truth which are pre-determined by the language into which people are born.

According to their way of thinking, your subjective truth and my subjective truth are equally valid even if they contradict each other, because no objective standards exist for evaluating either one of them.

Like all intellectual fads, postmodernism will pass into the dust heap of history where other philosophical fads have ended up, but while it is with us it has done damage,

It has opened the door wider to moral anarchy, puffed up its adherents with intellectual pride, and added to a rising tide of Godlessness in the world.

Its adherents are among the people Paul warned of when he wrote: *“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”*

But if words are cheap, God's Word is not.

And God's Word tells us plainly that there **is** such a thing as truth, that there **are** such things as lies and that though lies are many, the truth is one.

And that God's Word is itself the truth which nourishes our faith and sets us free from our sins.

“If you continue in my Word,” said Jesus, *“you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”*

It's never been said better than it is in a hymn we sang earlier today, a hymn which was written by a Missouri Synod pastor who taught at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis back in the mid-50's.

His name was Martin Franzmann and the hymn is *Thy Strong Word*. Listen once again to its words:

Thy strong word did cleave the darkness; at thy bidding, it was done.
For created light we thank thee, while thine ordered seasons run.
Thy strong word bespeaks us righteous; bright with thine own holiness;
Glorious now we press toward glory; and our lives our hopes confess.
Allelujah! Allelujah! May the light which thou dost send Fill our songs with
allelujahs, allelujahs without end!

Amen.

Father in heaven:

In the beginning, Your Mighty Word created the heavens and the earth, all matter and energy, and life itself. Even today, here in Your Holy House, Your Mighty Word washes away our sins, nourishes our faith, and re-creates us, ever more like the image of Your Son, Your Word incarnate. Send your Holy Spirit into our hearts and minds, Father, and move us each day to avail ourselves of Your Mighty Word so that we may continue to know the truth that makes us free.

Father, send your Spirit into the hearts and minds of those who are suffering, whether from sickness or injury or emotional distress or financial hardship. Bless the families of all who worship here today, so that where there is strife or tension, it might give way to peace and to love. Let your divine shalom rest on each one of us and help us to be peace-makers in our homes, our jobs, and among our friends.

Bless this congregation, Father, and kindle in our hearts the desire to impart our faith to people in the unbelieving world. Give us lips to sing thy glory, tongues thy mercy to proclaim, throats that shout the hope that fills us, mouths to speak Thy Holy Name.

All the concerns of our heart, Father, we lay before you in the prayer you have taught us to pray...