

TWO JOURNEYS

Today is Reformation Sunday—the day we celebrate Martin Luther’s rediscovery of the good news that God has freely forgiven the sins of mankind for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ and welcomes all people back into His family. We who were orphans now have a heavenly Father who loves us and promises to take care of us—in this life and the next. This is the Gospel, and it is good news indeed!

But in Luther’s time, the Gospel wasn’t so easy to find. Over the centuries, it had come to be buried under a mountain of church doctrines, traditions and canon law. But using the two-edged sword of God’s Word, Luther hewed his way into this mountain until he found the Gospel deep inside, still alive and breathing. Once he had discovered the good news, Luther immediately began to publish it abroad. Thanks to the newly invented printing press, his ideas were soon being read and discussed far beyond his parish in Wittenburg. Once it had been set free, the Gospel spread throughout Europe like wildfire.

Now all this “Gospelizing” didn’t go unnoticed. The message that God freely forgave men their sins on account of Jesus’ suffering and death was threatening to a Church that claimed that only its clergy had the authority to forgive sins. They responded to the proclamation of the Good News by trying to suppress it. A massive effort was mounted to silence Luther. All the powers of Pope and Emperor were brought to bear on him in order to force him to recant. He was cursed, hounded, harassed, libeled, blackmailed, anathematized and ultimately excommunicated. After all this failed to silence him, he was placed under the Imperial Ban. The Imperial ban was the 16th-century version of capital punishment: it consisted of a direct order from the Emperor to every citizen in the Holy Roman Empire to kill Luther on sight or turn him over to officers of the Emperor. The penalty for knowing Luther’s whereabouts and failing to turn him in was death.

But Luther stood firm. To have sacrificed or compromised his convictions about the Gospel would have been to go against the Word of God and his own conscience, and that was unthinkable. At Worms, in peril of being burned alive at the stake if he refused to recant, he uttered words which were to become famous: *“Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures—for my conscience is captive to the Word of God—I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen.”*

Luther was, without question, a man of great genius, extraordinary character and exceptional courage. Almost singlehandedly, he stared down both Pope and Emperor, and his message ultimately prevailed.

As Lutherans, we are prone to make something of a demigod out of Luther, to imagine him as a German David who ventured out on the battlefield against unthinkable odds and brought down the Roman Goliath. That’s a far cry from how Luther saw himself. He regarded himself simply as a servant of the Word of God. The Word had originally given birth to the Church and the Word was now reforming the Church. Toward the end of his life Luther wrote: *“The Word did everything. I could have started a pretty party at Worms if I had chosen to, but I entrusted everything to the Word. While I sat in Wittenburg and drank good beer with my friend Philip, the same Word which had once turned the Roman Empire upside down now weakened and burst the chains with which the Church had shackled the souls of men. It was always the Word.”*

Luther's life and work consisted of two journeys which took him in two different directions. The first was a journey *into* himself. The second was a journey *out of* himself and into God's Word. What he discovered about himself and about God is summed up very simply in the words of the great Puritan hymn writer, John Newton, whose last words before dying were, "*I am a great sinner, but Christ is a great Savior.*"

Luther began his inward journey during his time as an Augustinian monk. He spent hours every day examining his thoughts, his motives, his words and his actions. Intense self-examination was a major part of monastic life, and Luther went at it like he went at everything else—with hammer and tong. He looked deeply into his own soul, searching for the spark of good he had been assured was there, but all he found was sin, sin and more sin: jealousy, selfishness, envy, greed, lust, anger, hatred, vanity, pride. He spent hours each day in the confessional and then left worrying that he had failed to confess some sin that he had forgotten, in which case he remained under judgment. The only thing in addition to confession which the Church had to offer was for him to perform acts of penance: prayers, good works, fasts, pilgrimages and the like. None of this, however, brought him relief. In time he fell into despair over his depravity and became convinced that he was headed straight for hell. He would confess his sins for hours every day, say endless Our Fathers and Hail Maries, yet still find no peace. How could God forgive him when he returned again and again to the sins he had just confessed? How sincere could his repentance really be?

Luther's journey into his own heart of darkness could well have ended up in despair and death, but, thanks to God, at the same time as he was exploring his sinful soul, he was also exploring God's word, searching there for an antidote to his despair.

His discovery of the Gospel came while he was reading Paul's *Letter to the Romans*. In *Chapter 3*, after a long discussion of man's total depravity and his inability to become righteous through his own efforts,, Paul had written: "*But now a righteousness that is from God...has been made known.... This righteousness FROM God comes THROUGH FAITH in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*" Suddenly Luther realized that the righteousness he had so desperately been seeking through self-examination and confession and acts of penance—this righteousness was his to have as a gift from God, simply through faith in Jesus Christ. All he had to do was to trust God's promise to forgive our sins for Christ's sake, and he would be made clean. He had been trying to earn what was already his as a gift.

Later in his life, Luther wrote that at that very moment it was as if the gates of paradise opened up to him. The agony and despair to which he had been reduced by the knowledge of his sins was replaced by God's gifts of grace, mercy and peace. He had desperately looked for righteousness within himself but found only corruption. Now he looked OUTSIDE himself—to God—and found a righteousness which was his, simply through faith. His salvation didn't depend on anything *he* could do; it depended *upon what God had already done*. For Luther, it was the beginning of a new life.

Each one of us is embarked upon the same two journeys Luther made. We're all born enslaved to sin, and as we look inside ourselves, we find the same desolate landscape that Luther found. Each one of us has constructed his own prison out of his own favorite sins. Your dungeon and my dungeon are different dungeons. but believe me, they are both dungeons. We have built them stone by stone, sin by sin; we have shot the bolt and locked the doors and consigned ourselves to the darkness within. And the bad news is: as long as we are in this world, part of us is going remain locked in that dungeon, because part of us

loves it too much to leave it. As one of our hymns goes: *“Our own land’s fairest breezes, bear sounds of steeple bells; All nature’s beauty pleases, yet man builds constant hells.”*

But the good news is that that another part of us—the eternal part of us—is on an entirely different journey. That part hates the darkness and yearns for the light of Christ that frees us from the dungeon of our sins. The great hymn-writer, Charles Wesley, gave voice to that part of us in his hymn *And Can It Be*:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fastbound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused the quickening ray,
I woke—the dungeon flamed with light,
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

Two journeys. The first is a journey into ourselves as we pray to the Holy Spirit of God to show us all of the darkness that lies in our souls. It’s an unpleasant journey but a healthy one, for as Solomon wrote, *“The purposes of a man’s heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding will draw them out.”* If we don’t understand how enslaved we are to sin, how can we understand what it means to be set free? How can we know God’s grace if we don’t know our own sins?

The other is a journey into the Word of God, keeping in mind our Lord’s promise: *If you continue in my Word, you are truly my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.* You don’t have to be a scholar to make your journey into God’s Word. You just need to put yourself regularly in its presence—at church or at home. It’s just like eating—which you do every day. The Word of God is food for the soul and nourishment for the faith that receives God’s grace and mercy and peace.

And let us always remember that the two journeys have a single destination: the truth. The truth about us and the truth about God. And this truth is simple: you and I are great sinners, but...God is a great Savior.

Amen

Romans 3:21-31 The Righteousness of God Through Faith

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. ³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.