

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Reformation Sunday, October 31, 2021

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 267, 283, 263, 269, 262.

Lessons: Psalm 119:41-48, Ephesians 6:10-18, Matthew 11:12-19.

Sermon Text: Psalm 124.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

We began our worship today with the words of Hymn 267: “If God had not been on our side And had not come to aid us, The foes with all their power and pride Would surely have dismayed us.” The hymn also stated that if God had permitted the furious wrath of our enemies, it surely would have consumed us.

Martin Luther wrote this in 1524, based on our sermon text. Many difficult things had happened to Luther by that time in his life. By 1513, when he was 30, he was a teacher with a doctor’s degree in theology at the University of Wittenberg. In 1515 he lectured on the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans. At some point he became fully convinced that *“in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”* Romans 1:17 (NIV) *“The just shall live by faith.”* (KJV)

What he found in Scripture led to his thorough examination of the Roman Catholic Church in which he had spent his whole life. He was by that time seriously examining its teachings including the practice of indulgences. In 1517 indulgences were pieces of paper purchased which in effect told you your sins were forgiven. That subject, of course, was the contents of his 95 Theses of October 31, 1517. Remember that date, because this sermon will present several other dates in Luther’s life up until he wrote this hymn in 1524.

As a result of what he had uncovered in the Scriptures, he became more and more convinced that *“it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.”* Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV) So he could rejoice with David, the author of this Psalm and realize that God had been with him, guiding him into the Scriptures and say

“PRAISE BE TO THE LORD”

- 1. Israel praised and thanked the Lord.**
- 2. Luther praised and thanked the Lord.**
- 3. May we praise and thank the Lord!**

David makes it plain that *“If the LORD had not been on our side”* – and he repeats that, telling all Israel to join in the rejoicing – *“if the LORD had not been on our side when men attacked us”* God’s people would have been swallowed up alive, they would have been drowned as if in a flood, they would have been torn like the prey of a wild animal, and they would have been captured like a bird in a snare.

There were many instances in the history of Israel that could fit those pictures. The Egyptians became angry with their slaves – Israel – during the 430 years of their time in Egypt. When the Israelites crossed the Red Sea on dry land, the waters could easily have swept over them. When they fought nation after nation on their way to the Promised Land and even as they conquered armies larger than them in the Promised Land, they could have been destroyed. Because of God’s gracious hand, they *“escaped like a bird out of the fowler’s snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped.”*

All these pictures meant something to God’s chosen people, as the Psalm tells us.

But the pictures were meaningful to Martin Luther, too.

In the summer of 1518, just months after the 95 Theses were posted on the church door, the Pope summoned Luther to Rome to answer accusations of heresy. Because of the Elector Frederick, Luther's civil leader in Germany, the hearing was transferred to Augsburg. Although Luther escaped papal punishment at that time, he continued his attacks on the Church of Rome based on Scripture. The more he studied Scripture, the more he found unscriptural in the teachings and practice of the Roman Catholic Church.

In June of 1520 41 alleged errors and heresies of Luther were condemned, and books containing them were ordered burned. In January 1521 the Pope threatened excommunication, which would have meant that no one should associate with Luther. There was no other church than the Church of Rome.

In April of 1521 Luther appeared before the Diet, (the *Reichstag*, or council) at Worms. There the church demanded that he recant and take back everything he had said and written in the books piled on a table at the court. It was at this meeting, that Luther said that unless he were convinced by Scripture and plain reason, he could not take back what he had written. He did not accept the authority of Popes and church councils. It was at this meeting that he said "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." As a result, Charles the Fifth, the emperor who was a devout Catholic, declared Luther an outlaw and commanded all his subjects to refuse Luther hospitality, lodging, food, or drink, and to take him prisoner and turn him over to the Emperor. This decree also prohibited the printing, buying, or selling of Luther's works. This edict of the emperor stayed in force all of Luther's life.

God and the Elector Frederick intervened and kidnapped Luther – a friendly kidnapping! – and took him to the Wartburg castle. During this isolation, Luther translated the New Testament into German, and continued writing. He eventually came back to Wittenberg in March, 1522.

Having finally been excommunicated, having his life in danger, and still being alive, protected, and able to preach and teach the truth of God's Word, Luther had a great deal to be thankful for when he wrote this hymn in 1524. There are several English translations of this hymn, but the one in our hymnal gets the message across: If God had not been on his side, Luther – and his fellow believers – would have been lost. But thanks and praise to God for preserving them!

In this hymn Luther recognized that God had been with him and his fellow believers. Their enemies would have overwhelmed them except for God's power. They were a little flock compared to the Roman Catholic Church which attacked Luther and those who stood with him. If God had not been with them, they would have despaired. They were like drowning men if God had not rescued and guided them.

And the last stanza is a hymn of praise to God for what he had done. One English translation reads: "Thank God! As from a snare the bird doth flit, So is our soul escaped." And Luther closes with the idea "The name of God, it standeth true, the God of earth and heaven!"

Just as this psalm meant much to the Israelites, so it meant much to Luther. The melody attached to it in our hymnal was first published 13 years later, so we don't know exactly what melody Luther might have sung. But that doesn't really matter as much as the words, the content, which thank and praise God for all he has done.

In Luther we find a strong leader, one who stood up to popes and bishops and the power of the Roman Catholic Church. But we don't praise the man Martin Luther. We praise God for what he accomplished through Doctor Martin Luther.

At the time of year when we celebrate the Reformation we especially remember Martin Luther. But we don't put him on a pedestal like some have accused Lutherans of doing. We thank God for Luther's writings, and for pointing us back to the Holy Scriptures, "***which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.***" 2 Timothy 3:15 (NIV)

We don't praise the man, but we can praise the work God permitted him to do.

So what does the Reformation really mean to us?

The very first thing we must think of is the Word of God in its truth and purity. We have been privileged for just over 500 years to have the pure Word of God preached and taught unto our ancestors – and even to us – by the grace of God! We have been privileged that we have the ability even today to strive to continue in that Word of God in its truth and purity.

Satan is attacking us on every front. Don't you sometimes wonder if God is on your side? Satan has deceived many people whom the world thinks of as Christian leaders to approve of sin, to pervert the Word of

God, to say and teach many things which God's Word does not. We must be careful every day of our lives to ***"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."*** Matthew 7:15 (KJV)

We have received the heritage of God's pure Word and pray that we may preserve it for our children, grandchildren, and future generations. The world and Satan are doing everything they can to take the Word of God away from us and to take us away from the Word of God.

The Psalm begins "If the Lord had not been on our side". The hymn begins "If God had not been on our side." Is God on my side?

Perhaps we should give more attention to the question: "Are you on God's side?" It is a daily struggle even against our own flesh to remain faithful to God and 'stay on his side'. This Psalm gives all glory to God for Israel's safety in the land. As a hymn it gives all glory to God for Luther's safety. Both the psalm and the hymn remind us to give all glory to God for our safety in all things.

We are a little flock, despised by such a crowd of people who think of us as a cult or Bible fanatics or worse – and have said many untrue and unkind things about us and our small group and our congregations.

We find comfort in the Word of God. We have our Bibles and our hymnals.

We have the truth of God's Word. We must fight to continue to learn it in order to ***"grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."*** 2 Peter 3:18 (KJV)

By the Grace of God we can thank God and praise God that we have the message of the Reformation. May we always speak the truth of God's Word. May we always reach out and speak out so that many may come to the truth of that message. Amen.