

The Reformation Storm

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[0:00] So, it's wonderful to be with you. I bring you greetings from Trinity Fellowship Church. Many years ago, we began a tradition of a pulpit exchange on Reformation Sunday to acknowledge the importance of the Reformation and the commonality of churches that are the fruit of that Reformation that came to its fruition in the 16th century in Europe. Let me read again for you that couple of verses from Romans chapter 1. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed. From faith for faith. As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. Like a lightning bolt that suddenly brightens up a darkened room and makes visible the furnishings, God illuminated the words of these verses. And Martin Luther saw for the first time the wonderful contours of the gospel. This marked a great work of God in Luther's life and the beginning of the Reformation storm in the early 16th century. We have good reason to remember and celebrate the

Reformation movement in Europe. We understand that it had its imperfections. And that's important to remember. Nevertheless, Luther and other Reformers, despite their imperfections, was used by God. No significant spiritual revival, sadly, is untainted by sin. But it would be folly to dismiss the good of revivals because of the excesses of certain teachers or the misunderstandings of certain converts. Neither do we have to argue for the perfection to conclude that the thing is worth memorializing.

In America, we celebrate Thanksgiving, not because every Puritan or colonist was perfect, but to honor the sacrifices and be inspired by the virtues, to be thankful for the outcome. More than anything else, Reformation Sunday is an opportunity to glorify God through remembrance. With thankfulness, we recall the Lord's faithfulness to purify and revive his people. With this in mind, we'll look at three things this morning. The historical conditions that gave rise to the Reformation storm, Martin Luther's internal storm from cringing fear to firm faith, and lessons of the Reformation for us. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, grant us humble hearts, alert minds, and contrite spirits as we consider your glorious words and works. And please bless the at Trinity Fellowship this morning. Bless his ministry of the word we ask. In Jesus' name. Amen.

First, then, some historical conditions that gave rise to the Reformation storm. If you're not a historian and are not interested in history very much, I apologize. Usually on Sunday we don't spend time doing a lot of this, but just once in a while I think it is worth remembering in this way.

[4:03] We might describe the spiritual climate of Europe in the Middle Ages as oppressively human. During the medieval period, the Catholic Church became the major power broker in Europe. But its growth and wealth, political power, and coercive social influence had come at great cost. Jesus' words to the leadership of his day are apt. The cathedrals were unmarked tombs. The bishops were full of dead men's bones.

The priests strained gnats but swallowed camels. The established European Church was outwardly holy and pious, but the inside of the cup was filthy and stained. For the sake of tradition, they made void the word of God. But weather patterns in Europe were conspiring to bring dramatic changes to the spiritual atmosphere. A storm was brewing. And several trends in the Middle Ages prepared the way for the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. We'll look at three of them, three of the most important weather fronts, so to speak. Political, intellectual, and spiritual.

We'll do so very briefly. On the political front, kings and princes were centralizing their power and looking for greater autonomy from the Holy Roman Empire. The Catholic Church and its popes were increasingly seen as political rivals. Church power plays in the manipulation of the papacy caused offense and alienation. As the Roman Church exercised her power and influence, secular

rulers recognized her worldly motives. This diminished their respect for the Church's claim of a heavenly mandate to rule. The result of these wide-ranging patterns was a gradual decrease in the Roman Church's influence and ability to control and stamp out reform. On the intellectual front, you had critical scholarship and the spread of ideas. In scholarship, in a field we would call philology, there was a movement in the study of words, a growing scrutiny and ambition to translate with accuracy the original intent of a text. This was not new to the world, but it was trending among scholars. When you hear the name

Johannes Gutenberg, you'll think of what? Oh, can you remember that? The printing press with movable type. The printing press was to Europe at the turn of the 16th century, as the Internet has been to the world at the turn of the 21st century. Suddenly, accessibility to news and ideas grew exponentially.

Circulation of information and mass communication became possible and was greatly enhanced. The free spread of ideas is always a danger to false teaching and despotic power. The spread of Reformation teaching would be hugely aided by the printing press. And now on the spiritual front, the Middle Ages were marked by pietistic, that is, holiness movements, and a growing hunger for true spirituality. This manifested itself in various ways in the 14th and 15th centuries. There were attempts at doctrinal reform, but they lacked spiritual zeal. There were pietistic movements with the bloom of heartfelt zeal, but without the root of doctrinal reform. As a result, reform was never widespread or enduring enough to bring transformation. For most, the worldliness of the Roman Church inspired no more than a worldly sorrow. But for some, there was a godly grief at the state of affairs. There was a cry in the hearts of some for spiritual truth and life. And the Lord heard that cry. It is common today to speak of a perfect storm, a combination of conditions that result in a cataclysmic event. It is even more common to forget that the weather is in God's hands, not the meteorologist's. It would be accurate to say that God in his mercy was orchestrating obstructions, the perfect conditions for a storm. And the nailing of the 95 theses, Luther's criticism of the [9:08] Roman Church at the door of Wittenberg Seminary in 1517 was like a thunderclap. The clouds were all already dark and lowering. The Reformation storm would clear away the institutional obstructions to understanding and proclaiming the gospel. The Catholic Church tradition had become a scaffolding structure that obscured the beauty and the power of the scriptures. Great medieval cathedrals were built with spires pointing to heaven. But the teaching of the church had hidden the glory of God's word. They were teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. The cornerstone had become a mere keystone in the many arches. They had buried the foundation of the apostles and the prophets under the weight of a

Latin mass that no common man could understand. The soaring, flying buttresses did nothing to set the soul free. The priests and the bishops were often as spiritually dead as the stones that built the cathedrals.

But God can make the stones cry out. And in fulfillment of Ezekiel 36, he turned one monk's heart to flesh and made him a lightning rod for the Reformation movement. Martin Luther and his internal storm. There are many important figures of the of the Reformation in Europe, all worth learning about. Wycliffe, Tyndale, Hus, Calvin, Zwingli, but none were more pivotal than Martin Luther. Interestingly, it was a literal lightning storm that led Luther to give his life in service to God. But it was his internal storm that led to a courageous stand for God's truth.

So as many of you know, Luther was caught in a horrifying lightning storm. And in the midst of that, he vowed to give his life in service to God if he would preserve him.

[11:29] True to his word, Luther discontinued his law studies and became a monk. But cringing fear would characterize Luther's faith for years.

Luther had a long crisis of faith. He was constantly plagued by guilt and craven fear. He found no relief in Catholic doctrine. He laid hold of sacraments, of pilgrimages, of indulgences, the intercession of the saints, but always returned to the same wretched state of guilt and fear. These are Luther's words. For however irreproachable I lived as a monk, I felt myself in the presence of God to be a sinner with a most disturbed conscience.

I did not love but rather hated this just God who punishes sinners. And with huge murmuring, I was indignant against him. As if it were not enough for God to oppress miserable sinners with the Ten Commandments, but he must bring sorrow on sorrow and through the gospel reveal his justice, and through the gospel bring his wrath to bear.

Thus I was enraged with a fierce and agitated conscience. And yet, I kept on knocking at St. Paul in that place, with burning thirst to know what he really meant.

[12:57] And that place in the scripture that Luke was knocking at was Romans 1.17. Despite Luther's profound spiritual difficulties, he was an excellent scholar, and he was appointed the professor of biblical theology at Wittenberg Seminary.

He was lecturing on Paul's epistle to the Romans. As he prayed and meditated on scripture, light came. Luther says, As at last, by the mercy of God, I began to understand the justice of God as that by which God makes us just in his mercy and through faith.

As it is written, By faith the just man shall live. And at this, I felt as though I had been born again, and gone in through open gates into paradise itself.

It wasn't that no Catholic had ever heard this truth, but it was somehow misplaced, buried among the baggage. I don't know if you've ever seen the film Raiders of the Lost Ark.

But at the end, the Ark of the Covenant is placed among thousands of other items, forgotten and neglected in a huge storage warehouse.

[14:27] The truth had to be rediscovered. Rediscovered by someone who embodied both the spiritual hunger and the scholarly ambition to know what Paul was really saying.

And Luther was married a passion for biblical truth and a passion to teach the liberty of grace. In his grace, God brought Luther to a desperate searching and then opened his eyes to the way of salvation.

Like a man drowning in a sunken ship, Luther had found the opening in the hull. The light from the surface streamed through and he found his escape.

And when he came to the surface, Luther filled his lungs with air and began to swim with all his might. To return to our storm metaphor, Luther beheld in his heart the rainbow that follows the storm, God's promise that could not be broken.

Filled with the assurance of justification by faith, Luther was free of his chains. He did not have to fear unknown reprisals from a distant and angry God.

[15:43] He could joyfully serve the God of mercy. He could now proclaim the gospel that is revealed not to condemn, but that through the sun the world might be saved.

The remainder of Luther's life would be spent zealously working out the implications of this truth for himself, for the confessing church, and for unbelievers.

A new day had dawned in Luther. The external storm of the Reformation was just beginning. You know, it wasn't pretty. It wasn't neat in tiety.

And things in this world never are. Luther wanted open debate and reform within the Roman Catholic Church, but he was met with threats and condemnation.

Luther was brought before Catholic officials and the greatest German prince, Charles V, at the Diet of Worms. They demanded that he renounce his writings and repent.

[16:44] According to tradition, it was at this meeting at which Luther said, Here I stand. I can do no other. So help me God. Bound by conscience, In God's word, he had no other choice.

Luther had then to be kidnapped by his protector, the German prince, Frederick the Wise, to continue his work. He felt like a caged bird, but he was magnificently productive.

Luther thought and wrote and began translating the Bible into German so that his fellow man could read God's word in their own language the first time.

For the rest of his life, Luther would produce a major pamphlet every two weeks. By the end of his life, his writings would fill 100 volumes.

As much as Luther regretted the division, conflict, and even bloodshed that ensued, he would never regret standing firm for the gospel.

[17:48] It's much more, of course, to Luther's life. The other great events and complex dynamics of the Reformation storm must be left to your further study and reflection. We move along to some personal reflection, hopefully, some observations and application for our lives today.

Lessons of the Reformation for us. It is right to honor and respect the work and sacrifice of the Reformers. After all, they risk their very lives.

They are our forebearers of the faith. But we need not feel the necessity to whitewash their weaknesses and failings either. The types of the Old Testament foreshadowed Christ.

The saints of the New Testament era show forth his light, but they all do so imperfectly. Jesus alone spoke what he heard from his Heavenly Father and did his will unerringly.

Luther attempted to follow the pattern of Jesus, and that is what we must do. Looking to Jesus, the author and the perfecter of our faith, listening to God's word, and doing his will.

[19:04] We will not be perfect. But we must nevertheless live and speak the truth according to our conscience. As Luther said, or inspired, where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved.

And to be steady on all battlefields besides is mere flight and disgrace, if we flinch at this point.

Romans 1.16 says, For I am not ashamed of the gospel.

I am not ashamed. I will not hide the gospel. I will not obscure the gospel with my words.

I will not soft-pedal any of the truth of the gospel. I will not be ashamed by the gospel. It is worth living and giving and dying for.

Those who lay down their lives for the gospel will not be put to shame. Sometimes we forget that Jesus in his resurrected body bore the scars of his suffering.

[20:29] Does that not suggest to us the significance of our suffering as we pick up our cross daily to follow him? If you are not a believer, consider how many people have grappled with the scriptures and found liberty, soul-satisfying hard labor, adventure, and abundant joy.

Over the course of nearly 2,000 years, men and women have given their blood, sweat, and tears for this gospel. They have found comfort in their sadness, freedom from their sins and addictions, purpose in their wandering, and hope in their grief.

Why not you? Is it powerful enough to save you? Romans 1.16 says this, It is the power of God for salvation. There is more than enough power to save you.

When someone says, Can God save even me? It is like a child saying, Can an aircraft carrier stay afloat with even my weight on it?

Or can this airplane get off the ground with my doll in the overhead compartment? There is no question. He is the God who saves.

[21:50] His grace is sufficient for any sinner, unchanging through the centuries, untainted by man's faithlessness, and ever filled with urgency and power.

Like Luther, you must first see your need. Luther was convinced of three things that prepared him for the good news. He was deeply aware of his own sin.

He was convinced of God's holiness, and he saw his utter inability to earn God's favor by his words. You must first reckon yourself a pitiful sinner before you can feel the rapture of forgiveness.

When you see the chains of your slavery to death and sin, you will find the key at the foot of the cross worthy of all the songs of Christendom. The devotion and suffering and martyrdom of all the worshipers over the century will seem only fitting.

You've got to seek him with your whole heart and admit that you don't see. Luther was a brilliant scholar. He studied the scriptures for many years.

[23:02] Luther had come to the conclusion that he could not do it himself. Luther's eyes were opened as he was humbled by his incapacity.

Unlike his contemporaries in the Pharisees of Jesus' day, he cried out for help. And he saw that since God had judged his sins in Christ, he no longer had a judge.

But he had a Heavenly Father instead. Is it for you? This is the sense of Romans 1.16. To everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, it is good news for all who believe without exception.

God, in his infinite wisdom and mercy, has sent his Son to die for your sins and mine. You may lay hold of eternal life by believing in him.

It is not of works, lest any man should boast. It is all of God and for his glory. What wonderful good news to believe, as I know most of you do, and maybe all of you do, but what wonderful news as we rehearse it to proclaim to those you love, to your neighbors, your co-workers, and friends.

[24:31] The righteous shall live by faith as they place their faith in the righteous one. I spoke of a perfect storm which prepared Europe for reformation.

But, you know, contemporaries of Luther would not have predicted the events of his century and the centuries beyond, would they? It's difficult to ascertain the spiritual climate of our own times, let alone to predict the purifying and reviving work of God.

Are we on the cusp of great persecution? Are we far from revival? What gives us hope and peace is God's sovereignty and our clear sense of purpose.

Whatever the times, we are in God's hands. In the middle of his poem, not slipping between his fingers or off his fingertips, but in the middle of his poem, safely.

No one can snatch us away and our purpose stands to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to do all that Jesus taught.

[25 : 52] So, we must daily pick up our cross and say, here I stand. I can do no other. A revival begins in the Church and it must start in the invisible places of our hearts before it will become visible to the world.

As Luther wrote to his wife from his deathbed, who knows what God will do. let's pray. Amen. Most holy and merciful Heavenly Father, we thank you for purifying and reviving your Church through the centuries.

We thank you for the sufficiency of your Word and its power to save us and bring us to maturity through your Holy Spirit.

may we be found humble, willing, diligent, and courageous servants. For Jesus' name's sake, Amen.

Amen. Thank you.