

Reformation Day - Luther And His Work.

Text: Psa 119:30

Suggested Hymns:

195, 199, 200, 207, 352

1) Just what is it that made Luther what he was?

2) How did Luther accomplish all that he did for God and for mankind?

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Psalm 119:130, ¹³⁰ *The entrance of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

History has indissolubly linked and joined these two — Luther and the Reformation. Who can think of Dr. Martin Luther and not recall the Reformation? Who can speak of the Reformation and not mention Luther? The one invariably suggests the other.

I said that history had joined them, but God Himself has joined them. God determined the work, and God Himself chose His instrument. This brings to mind the words of Revelation 14:6-7, ⁶ *Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth -- to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people --* ⁷ *saying with a loud voice, "Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water."*

But the man Luther and the historical event, the Reformation, are not only connected as the man and his work, there is another bond of union between them, — both are fruits on the same tree. They are both the product of the same power.

That which made Luther made the Reformation, and that which made the Reformation made Luther. And whatever it was that made them, the results were colossal and astonishing. In a thousand years Luther is the mental and spiritual giant who outstrips all others, and the Reformation is that event which interrupted and halted the process of degeneration which had corrupted all society, —

educational, political, and ecclesiastical. The speed of the Reformation and the extent of the interests which it involved are unique in the journals of human affairs.

So wonderful, so immense, so overpowering, is all that is connected with Luther and the Reformation that, whenever we discuss this man and this subject, we are in danger of making the mistake of those who gaze on all of this, as people who gaze at the strange things which they see in a museum.

They wonder and stare, and they speak with astonishment of what they have seen, but they derive little or no genuine benefit from what they see. We want to avoid that mistake today.

Our chief purpose today is not to praise Luther, — although we cannot help but honour him whom God has honoured, — our purpose today is rather to appropriate to ourselves those blessings which God chose and chooses to bestow on us through this man Luther and his work, the Reformation.

With this purpose in view, let us now, on the basis of our text, ask and answer these two questions. Just what is it that made Luther what he was? and How did Luther accomplish all that he did for God and for mankind? May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Just What Is It That Made Luther What He Was?

In order to answer the first question, we must briefly review Luther's life. Martin Luther was certainly endowed by God, even in his very birth and nature, with extraordinary natural powers and gifts of body and mind.

His parents and others, for example, Mrs. Cotta, Staupitz, Frederick the Wise, etc., soon noticed that. He was a lad of exceptional mental brightness, of more than ordinary ability, of a wonderful retentive memory, of deep insight, acute judgment, and capable of sincere, deep feelings and strong attachments.

Just as the mother of Moses quickly saw that he was a fine child,¹ so the parents of Luther soon recognised some of the talents of their first-born child. They bore bitter hardships and made painful sacrifices to give this boy of theirs a proper education and to prepare him for a place worthy of his natural talents. We do not hear that they did as much for their other children.

And Mrs. Cotta saw something in this boy Luther. We do not hear that she did for any one else what she did for little Martin. And the care bestowed on this boy was not bestowed in vain. He passed from school to school, until a mere youth, he entered the highest school of the land, the university. There he was one of the brightest and most promising students.

But right here, when hopes were to blossom into fruition, there came a frost, a chilling frost, which blighted the father's hopes and turned the young man from his course. Something happened which caused much pain and disappointed for the father. What was it? The evil fruits of the cruel superstitions which young Luther had learned in the Church began to show themselves.

That bright and hopeful young man, that advancing scholar, that gifted student, had drunk in the poisonous teachings of superstition and monasticism as taught by the Church of Rome.

The doctrine of salvation by works exerted its ruinous influence upon this youth. Even in his childhood it had robbed him of the joy and courage which should brighten the heart of every Christian child. And under the tyrannical sway of work-righteousness he became more and more a miserable wretch, tortured with all manner of harrowing fears.

Tighter and tighter this evil spirit fastened on his poor soul. More and more poor young Luther was driven from one fear to another, from one foolish effort to another, until in despair he gave himself up unreservedly to Rome and monasticism — he entered a cloister and became a monk. — Rome had schooled Luther and had perverted all his natural powers.

If ever there was a disciple and a scholar of the Roman system, it was Luther. And what did this doctrine of works make of that bright, hopeful, promising young man? Luther himself uses the most severe words when he speaks of this sad period of his life.

He calls himself "*the crazy saint,*" who believed every vile lie invented by the papal monks. As taught by the Church of Rome he tried to please God by torturing himself. He even journeyed to Rome to visit the church and relics, but nothing could give him peace with God.

What happened to Luther by the Church of Rome reminds us of our Lord's words in Matthew 23:15, ¹⁵ "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For*

you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

If all this had continued, what would have become of the poor man? Madman, hypocrite, or tyrant. But praise God! God Himself intervened. God had chosen Luther to be the Reformer of the Church, and God knew the instrument through which He wanted to fashion and prepare this man for His work.

The means and instrument was nothing else, and nothing less, than the Word of God of which our text speaks, *The entrance of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple.* God brought Luther to the Word and the Word to Luther.

And the Word of God exerted its influence on Luther. The Word of God is powerful as we read in Isaiah 55:10-11, ¹⁰ *“For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, And do not return there, But water the earth, And make it bring forth and bud, That it may give seed to the sower And bread to the eater, ¹¹ So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”*

The Word of God creates thirst and quenches the thirst as we read in Psalm 42:1, 2, 11, ¹ *As the deer pants for the water brooks, So pants my soul for You, O God. ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? ... ¹¹ Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; For I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.*

The Word of God removed Luther's superstitions with their harrowing fears. It relieved the tortures of his conscience. It broke the fetters which the doctrine of work-righteousness had fastened upon him. Of a moaning, whining, fasting, hungry, miserable, dying, superstitious wretch, the Word of God made a courageous, singing, rejoicing, testifying preacher and teacher of God's Word.

God made Luther the Reformer of the Church, the liberator of Christendom, the person who freed people from prejudice and superstition, the author of thousands of blessings for body and soul, the leader in school and Church, the prophet of the living God, the glorious hero and champion of the redeemed, who

could face emperor, princes, archbishops, cardinals, and Pope and express his determination to fight it with the help of God.

Remember what Luther said at the Diet at Worms, “*Unless I am convinced by clear and indisputable proofs from the Scripture, I neither can nor will retract anything. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.*”

Luther’s superstitions might have made him stand behind iron bars as a demented maniac, but now the Word of God had made him free, the Scriptures had taught him the truth, the Word had given him light. Instead of being a persecutor of the truth by following the church of Rome, he became the proclaimer of those good tidings of great joy which God has prepared for all people.

What is it that made Luther what he was? The text before us and the history of Luther’s life give us the answer. *The entrance of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple.* The Bible, this Book, this Word, this Gospel, made Luther what he was.

What has the Word of God done for you? For you and for me this celebration is in vain if we are not partakers of the gifts of God which come to man through the Word, and through the Word alone. *Sola Scriptura.*

2. How Did Luther Accomplish All That He Did For God And For Mankind?

And now we are ready to answer the second question which we have proposed. How did Luther accomplish all that he did for God and for mankind?

What this one man accomplished, the work that he did and the results which he achieved are certainly many indeed.

If we think of the rubbish which he cleared away and of the lasting treasures which he distributed, and would speak of them, — where would we begin, and where would we end?

The thousand years before Luther’s time are known as the Dark Ages. There was intellectual darkness, there was spiritual confusion and ignorance, and there was moral corruption and perversion, caused by false instruction and erroneous teaching in the church of Rome.

History shows the folly of the crusades, the constant contention between the Church and the State,² and the three Popes who opposed each other and spent the revenues of the Church, the superstition and ignorance of the people, the traffic in indulgences, and the corruption of the clergy.

If we remember that all this was supported by the wealth and power of the papacy and by the armies of kings, princes, and emperor, what a task it was to remove it!

Our text solves the mystery. *The entrance of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple.* Luther knew what the Word of God had done for him, and his confidence in this Word, his faith in it, was the victory which overcame the world. We read in 1 John 5:4, *For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world -- our faith.*

It was not the science of Galileo, it was not the learning and philosophy of Erasmus, it was neither the sword of Franz Von Sickingen nor that of Charles V, it was not the fanaticism of Carlstadt, it was not the "spirit" without the Word of the prophets of Zwickau,³ it was not the enormous wealth of the Fuggers of Augsburg, which brought light into those Dark Ages, but rather it was that Word of which our text states, *The entrance of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple.*

It was the power of that same Gospel of which Paul said in Romans 1:16, ¹⁶ *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.* Science did not rescue the Bible, but the Bible rescued science. The spirit in man did not reject superstition, but the Word of God lit up the spirit of man and drove out superstition. The power of the sword did not blaze a path for the Gospel, but the Gospel restored the power of the sword to the rightful possessor.

Those marvellous productions of Luther, namely his Catechisms, and especially his Small Catechism, is the only textbook in the Sunday School that has lasted for over four hundred and fifty years; but this little marvel is simply an extract from the Bible. It is the essence of this Word of God.

The Augsburg Confession is still the great unrefuted confession of all true prophets and preachers of Christ. We read in Acts 4:24, ²⁴ *So when they heard*

that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: “Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them. And in Acts 10:43, ⁴³ “To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.” And in Matthew 16:16, ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Think of Luther’s translation of the Bible. Think of Luther’s hymns and the hymns of other religious poets which followed. Think of the Reformation in Germany, in Denmark, in Norway, in Sweden, in Hungary, in England, in Scotland, in Holland. Think of all the Bible translations which followed. The liberation of the schools. Think of the religious liberty which we have here in our own country.

The sly and jeering ridicule of Erasmus drove some people to unbelief and others to bitter celebrations, but it did not bring light to God’s people. God’s Word, once more proclaimed and pointed to by Martin Luther, was what brought the light.

Luther himself was well aware of that. And he favoured education because education enabled the people to hear, to learn, and to read God’s Word, and God’s Word enables us to know the truth about God’s creation. It is therefore, and has always been, the true foundation for genuine, scientific advancement and learning.

We thank God, therefore, today that He gave us such a staunch lover, preacher, and defender of His Word as this man Luther. But we thank God much more that He has given us grace to know, to learn, to love, and to appreciate His Word.

Let us take to heart John 8:31-32, *“If you continue in My word, you are My disciples indeed. ³² “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”*

Let us conclude with the words of the hymnist,⁴

As God is God, and true His Word,
Though earth and hell and all their horde,
Though Satan’s might, assail us,

Beneath our feet will they be trod;
God is with us, and we with God:
His power will never fail us. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Exodus 2:2

² King Henry IV and Pope Hildebrand

³ Nicholas Storch, Thomas Dreschel, Markus Stübner

⁴ Hymn 200 v 3