

The Word Shall Yet Remain

A Service for Reformation

Hebrews 13:8–15 (ESV)

⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ⁹ Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. ¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³ Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.

As we observe the 498's anniversary of the Reformation, the nailing of the 95 Thesis to the Church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517 by Dr. Martin Luther I thought we'd begin by looking at the effects of sin in the world.

Sin brings about loss. Even our closing hymn for today speaks about loss. When we sing A Mighty Fortress later on listen closely as we sin:

And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife,
Though these all be gone, Our vict'ry has been won

That's been the dark undercurrent of the service: loss.

Loss of everything, including life itself.

Yet we cry out in faith that God is still with us. How can this be?

Sometimes people like to talk about the opinion of the law—the idea that if we do right, good things will happen to us, and if we do wrong, bad things will happen to us. This works out in a strange way in our lives.

When we see something bad has happened to someone else, we figure they did something to deserve it. When something bad happens to us, we convince ourselves that we're not that bad, that surely this is someone else's fault. When we see something good happened to someone else, we might wonder what they did to deserve it.

When something good happens to us, we convince ourselves that we deserve it. It's odd how that happens, but, of course, it's what we want to be true. Most folks don't think of themselves as bad people.

Outside of the movies, people don't go around calling themselves villains.

In fact, in some recent movies have tried to show how even classic villains aren't bad, just misunderstood. So if everybody's not that bad, why do bad things happen? Why do we lose the people and things we care about?

This question is actually very old.

The author of Hebrews refers back to Temple law and to the pagan worship of the time when he writes about people being strengthened by particular foods and blood sacrifices.

Such an approach is one answer to the question of why bad things happen: because you haven't made the right sacrifices. Make the right sacrifices, and things will go well for you.

Isaiah had a different encounter with the question of loss and bad things happening. He looked around him and saw creation dying. Grass withering, flowers fading. His response? "The word of God will stand ... Judah, behold your God!"

How is this a response to the question of loss and bad things happening?

Believe it or not, this question of why bad things happen, of why we lose those people and things we care for, sparked the Reformation.

You see, Martin Luther was convinced he was a bad person. He was convinced that God hated him, and by the opinion of the law, only bad things should happen to him. For a time, he tried making the right sacrifices.

We have stories about Luther confessing every time he had a bad thought, every time his mind wandered during a sermon, even every time he passed gas! It got so bad that at one time, his confessor told him to go away and actually sin before he came back to confession. But Luther was scared, you see, that he would die and go to hell. And he wasn't the only one who thought this way.

Indeed, the Church actually taught this at one point. Through plays and priests out on the streets, with rules and regulations, even tabulations for the penalties of various sins, the Church used people's fears to separate them from their money, telling them that this sacrifice could save them and their family members from eternity in hell.

Then Luther encountered the Word of God and, empowered by the Spirit, called the Church to repent from trusting in their own actions to save them and to keep bad things from happening to them. The Holy Spirit showed Luther the wondrous mercy of Jesus, who as the only acceptable sacrifice for our sin, suffered and died, not in the Temple, but in the world: in the halls of government where justice was perverted, through the streets and markets where jeers of derision were hurled at him, and outside the gates of the city where misery and death awaited him.

God opened Luther's heart and mind to see, as the author of Hebrews reminds us, that Jesus' suffering and death—which happened in those places where the world hurts—sanctified those places. This did not remove the suffering and loss, but sanctified it, made it holy. Jesus' suffering and death makes everyday life holy, despite the opinion of the law. This is the promise of Jesus, the Word of God.

When bad things happen, when we lose those people and things we care about, Jesus—the Word of God—promises that we have been given all things through Him and we will see those we have lost again. As Satan and his demons prowl about, they might take away all our possessions and property, they may take away all the people we care for, they may even take our lives, but this dark undercurrent is powerless against the Word of God.

Jesus, the Word of God, promises to us all things: life after death, the kingdom of God, the forgiveness of sins, and union with all those who also call on His name. And nothing Satan or his minions might do to us can take away or change the promise of Jesus, the promise of God.

Jesus, the Word of God, is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.

In the midst of our trials and temptations, the Spirit makes us holy because of Jesus' suffering and death in those places where the world hurts. Jesus has made the struggle through those trials holy, and Jesus has made the struggle against those temptations holy.

By His resurrection, this same Jesus, this same Word of God, by whose good news we make disciples, by whose command we baptize, and whose story we teach, promises to be with us always. This promise you can trust because God's Word shall yet remain. People of the kingdom, behold your God! (*Point to the cross.*)