

Our Impenetrable Fortress

“Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.”

Most faithful Lutherans know the sense of what Luther said when the emperor of Germany called him to the city of Worms and required him to take back what he had preached and written.

It is not that Martin Luther was the only person who ever dared to reform the church. There were others before him. A courageous man, but like us, Luther had his weaknesses, his moments of doubt.

Like Elijah after confronting the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, Luther went into hiding, fearing his life. Supporters arranged a friendly kidnapping and took him to the Wartburg Castle. While there, Luther devoted himself to a new task of translating the New Testament from its original Greek into German. All the while the devil didn't leave him alone. He thought, “The whole world is against me. Am I the only one who sees it this way? Can over 1,000 years of history be wrong? Why haven't others discovered the good news of the gospel?” Perhaps you feel this way when your life didn't go as you thought it would. Is God still with you? Why are you suffering?

In gloom, it is said he looked out the window and saw a wisp of smoke from a distant wood fire. Then a gust of wind whisked the smoke away. A moment of relief came to him. His anguish was gone. He realised it didn't matter what the rest of the world thought of him. Call him a heretic, make him hide out for his life. Pope and Emperor may imprison him, take his life, burn him at the stake. This did not matter. “Take they our life, goods fame child and wife. Though these all be gone, they have but nothing won. The kingdom ours remaineth.” (A Mighty Fortress is Our God).

That dark gloomy castle, intended to be a protection for him, had become a prison. But even those cold stone walls could not keep out the warmth of a God who loves His people. The Book of Psalms says the Church is like a fortress, a safe place where God guards us from evil.

We must correctly understand this. Some preach that when you are a Christian evil will not affect you. They haven't been to a hospital or nursing home lately. Neither have they had to travel to a hospital on a rainy night to see the lifeless body of their loved one. Preaching Christian faith without hardship is heresy. God does not shelter us from evil in the world. Christ had a cross, and so also will God bring a cross for us to carry. We do not pretend that once we come to faith Jesus nothing bad will ever happen to us.

Nor do we pretend that once we are believers, we somehow stop sinning. Rather, in the fortress of God's mercy we find the truth. We are miserable sinners. We are incapable of obeying God. Yes, we may obey in small ways. Outwardly we project images of good Christians. But inside... it's still a sewer hole of self-centredness, fear, and readiness to compromise as long as we are kept safe. When we do manage to do something good, we spoil it with our pride. We do not trust the Word of God to the shepherds, “*Fear not, I bring you good news of great joy that shall be for all people. For today in the city of David a Saviour has been born, Christ the Lord,*” (Luke 2:10-11).

If we really believed that, there would be no fear, no hesitation, and no church would ever have an empty seat. Thank God that the fortress of the Church doesn't depend on the strength of our faith or our good works! It rests completely on Jesus. The life He lived was a perfect, flawless life. His death was a complete sacrifice, more than enough to cover the sinfulness in us. And there's nothing we can do, whether it be giving offerings of money, as in Luther's day, or outward shows of feigned obedience, that will make God love us more than He already does.

Paul said it like this: "*Therefore no human being will be justified in His sight by doing what the Law says,*" (Rom. 3:20). We cannot make God love us through obedience. Good works do not make a person good. But a good person does good works.

This is the truth that we must hold on to. We cannot let it be covered over, watered down, or ignored to focus on something else that promises better results. Jesus said, "*If you remain in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,*" (John 8:31-32).

What is a Lutheran? We do not follow Martin Luther. We follow Jesus. He is our only Saviour. We follow Jesus the way Martin Luther did. That means we trust that believing the truth about Jesus is the main truth. We will not allow anything to take its place, no program of the church, no historical arguments, no trend that promises growth in the church, no compromise whatsoever.

There are so many divisions in the church: Lutherans and Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, Evangelicals, Presbyterians, Orthodox, Mennonite. You name it, there's a separate group, and each has its doctrine and way of life.

What matters is saving faith, not in yourself, your ability to obey, or how intense you obey. Not by good works. What God is looking for is faith. Trust that what His Son did on cross is enough, that you depend on it, would give up everything else to hold on to it. God supplies the faith, and asks us to hold on to it tightly. That's hard.

We should never align ourselves with anyone who teaches falsely. Especially those who say "Jesus died for you, so you must now accept it, obey it, put your signature on it to make it yours." That will take us outside the castle, where the devil can turn us to the sin of pride: "Look how obedient I am" or to despair, "I can't obey God. I unworthy to be saved."

Jesus said when you sin, you are a slave to sin. You can't free yourself. You are locked up in a castle dungeon. When Jesus, through His suffering, death and resurrection, sets you free from sin, you are really free. The castle that was once your dungeon now becomes a fortress to keep out your enemies: punishment for sin and sin's consequence - death, and the coming wrath of God at a sinful world.

We are not against doing good works. They just don't enter into the reason for why God saves us. Paul says, "*Have this mind in you that was also in Jesus, who being equal with God emptied Himself and became a servant, obedient unto death,*" (Phil. 2:5). That means when Christ became human He had everything, but He didn't go around being proud of Himself and arrogant, but rather gave Himself to working, preaching, enduring, suffering and dying for others. All this He did to serve us. When God now gives us such great riches, shall we not freely and joyously do everything in our power to please Him?

Martin Luther took his life into his own hands when he said, “Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me.” What are you standing on? Make sure it is the love of God for sinners, and the salvation He has bought for you in Jesus. Stand on that, and never fall. It is your fortress, impenetrable and strong.