

## **After Darkness, Light The Light of the Gospel (October 15, 2017)**

You have had a bad week. Screamed at the kids. Kicked the dog. Lied to a friend. And looked covetously at your neighbour's spouse.

Every week has had its own list of failings. You feel guilty. You know The Lord hasn't been pleased. You desperately want to get right with the Lord.

Then you realise – it is Sunday – the Lord's Day – so you make your way to church to hear how you can deal with your guilt.

But what if the year is September 1517 and your church is the Castle Church in the city of Wittenberg?

If you made your way into the church you would stand throughout the service with the other peasants and the middle classes as the Priest conducted the service – in Latin – which you don't speak – so you don't understand a word.

There is no congregational singing – just some monks chanting.

Your only hope of understanding any part of what is going on would be to look around at the stained glass windows and the frescoes and other art.

But you still cannot work out how you can get right with God.

So you stay around and beg the Priest to tell you what you must do.

He reluctantly points you to the confessional.

You sit down – Father I have sinned. You tell him every sin you can remember.

The answer comes – keep the sacraments, say nine Hail Marys and pay the fee for indulgences. Then he says:

I absolve you of your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In case your Roman Catholic theology is not up to scratch – the sacraments are ways to access the grace of God. The Church of Rome recognises seven of them.

- Baptism.
- Eucharist.
- Confirmation.
- Reconciliation.
- Anointing of the sick.
- Marriage.
- Holy orders.

Indulgences are a way to purchase excess merit that was accumulated by Christ and the saints.

The idea is that the Jesus and the saints were so godly that when they went to heaven they left behind a huge supply of merit that could be used by others – like you and me – who are not as godly.

This merit was often attached to some relics associated with them – bones, teeth, clothing, furniture.

If you lived in Wittenberg in 1517 – you were in luck in regard to excess merit because Frederick the Wise, elector of Saxony, had a huge collection of relics that he had made available to the Castle Church.

He made it known that all of his relics would be on display to any pilgrims on All Saints Day, which was November 1, 1517.

Here is the list of his relics – all of which had been verified by the church as ‘genuine’:

A cut of fabric from the swaddling cloth of baby Jesus, 13 pieces from His crib, a strand of straw from His manger, a piece of gold from a Wise Man, three pieces of myrrh, a morsel of bread from the Last Supper, a thorn from the crown Jesus wore when crucified, and, to top it all off, a genuine piece of the stone that Jesus stood on to ascend to the Father’s right hand.

But wait ... there is more.

As well there were three pieces of cloth from the Virgin Mary’s cloak, four from her girdle, four hairs from her head, and best of all, seven pieces from her veil that had been sprinkled with the blood of Christ from His suffering and crucifixion.

But wait ... there is more.

Besides this were countless other relics including 19,000 bones from various saints.

Roman Catholic scholars had authenticated all of these relics and had calculated that the combined merit that all of all of these items contained was enough to reduce the time sinners were in purgatory by – 1,902,202 years and 270 days.

Please do not ask me how they reached this conclusion.

What is purgatory? Unless you were a saint – everyone who was heading to heaven had to spend time in purgatory. It was the place where you were punished for your sins and purified so you could enter heaven holy.

Depending on how bad your life was – this dictated how long you spent in purgatory.

**But**, good news – you could buy an indulgence that transferred the excess merit of the saints to you and lessened or even eliminated your time in purgatory.

Basically, you could buy some of the excess merit of Saint Paul or Pope Pious or the Virgin Mary or even Jesus.

Or putting it more starkly, if you had enough money, salvation was for sale!

And in case you were reluctant to purchase it – the priests were given these lines to encourage the faithful to open their wallets.

“Listen to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends, beseeching you and saying, ‘Pity us, pity us. We are in dire torment from which **you** can redeem us for a pittance. ... Will you let us lie here in flames? Will you delay our promised glory?’”

But the most famous line was Johann Tetzel’s famous jingle, “*As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.*”

It was crass manipulation.

I cannot vouch for its veracity but to give you an idea of how indulgences worked a book from the Middle Ages called the “Tax of the Roman Chancery,” provides a list of the sums levied for the pardon of each sin. Here is a sampling of the prices:

Robbing a church	2.25
Perjury	2.00
Forgery and lying	2.00
Burning a house	2.75
Eating meat in Lent	2.75
Killing a layman	1.75
Striking a priest	2.75
Procuring an abortion	1.50
Priest to keep a concubine	2.25
Ravishing a virgin	2.00
Murder of father, mother, brother, sister or wife	2.50
Nun for fornication in or out of the nunnery	5.00
Marrying on a forbidden day	10.00
Adultery committed by a priest	10.00
Absolution of all crimes together	12.00

Notice that there is a bargain to be had – you can buy absolution of all your sins for one bargain price.

So – you did what your Priest told you to do – you kept the sacraments, said your Hail Marys and paid for an absolution – but you still feel dirty – there is no change in your life – something is wrong.

Then as you prepare to head to church on All Saints day – November first – you hear what happened the day before.

One of the Augustinian monks – Martin Luther – had done something radical.

The day before All Saints Day – on October 31, 1517 – Luther had walked up to the Castle Church in Wittenberg and nailed a list of 95 theses to the door of the church.

Luther had come to abhor the crassness of indulgences. They were very obviously a means to raise money to pay for the building of Saint Peter's in Rome.

As well, he had come to the place where he could no longer accept that a few hail Marys and a few silver coins could pay for sin.

In fact, to Luther, this system actually seemed to encourage sin – so he formulated his 95 theses and the day before the relics went on display – he nailed them to the door of the church for every pilgrim to see.

You read these theses and as you do – you find yourself saying – this is truth. Yes – this is what can wash me clean.

This event is important today because unless you are a Christian who lives in a cave – you must have noticed your email, your Facebook page, your Twitter feed filling up with references to *Reformation 500*.

In 16 days time, the world will celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this day when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church.

Humanly speaking this was a minor event – but in the hands of a sovereign God it changed the course of world and church history.

If you read Luther's 95 theses – I suspect you might be surprised. They are not a clear, full blown declaration of Protestantism. Far from it. In 1517, Luther was a good Catholic monk wanting to reform the Roman Catholic Church from within.

But in the plan of God – this event was the first crack of light in the spiritual darkness that would blossom to become the Reformation.

The response to Luther's theses was brutal and it showed him that the Roman Catholic Church was beyond reform and was far darker than he originally thought.

But from that moment, the true light of the gospel began to be recovered.

Later, the Reformers recognised this and the motto of the Reformation became – *Post Tenebras Lux* – and if your Latin is a little rusty – this means – “**After darkness, Light.**”

After the spiritual darkness of the Middle Ages came the searing light of the Reformation.

And it is not just the church that changed. The Reformation led to the Enlightenment. Art, music, science, medicine, social justice all were transformed.

Wittenberg was – one small act for man – one giant leap for mankind.

As I have pondered this event – I believe that the reason the Reformation was such a searing light is that at its core:

**The Reformation returned the focus of the church to the glory of God.**

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*Soli Deo Gloria – To The Glory Of God **Alone**.*

This is my overall point for our three sermon series.

When you realise God's power and holiness and love. When you realise that He is the only possible means of salvation. When you realise every event in your life and in world history is sovereignly guided by Him. When you realise He is the only true source of joy and life – then the church is in a position to be restored to its place as the God-ordained tool of missions and maturing.

By 1517, the church had long since lost its way.

The centre of church authority had moved from God's word to Papal authority.

The focus of the church had moved from God's mission to reach the world to consolidating church power.

The message of the church had moved from God's grace to man's effort.

The church was in a very dark place – and what saved it was a restored focus on the glory of God – and the truths that led from it.

As the Reformation developed and matured these truths became known as the **5 Solas**.

Or again for those whose Latin is lacking – in English – the **5 Alones**.

To the Glory Of God **Alone**.

By Grace **Alone** – Through Faith **Alone** – In Christ **Alone** – Based On Scripture **Alone**.

Foundational, unalterable, unshakeable truths that must never again be allowed to be suppressed.

The history of the Reformation is a vivid reminder to us that if the church ever moves our eyes – our focus – our hope from God to anything else – we inevitably lose our way.

And so, as this anniversary approaches it is a wonderful opportunity for us to pause – examine the lessons of the Reformation and turn the torch of self-examination on our church and on ourselves to make sure our focus and drive is where it needs to be.

There are so many aspects of the Christian life that are reorientated by pausing to focus on the glory of God. How do you choose three?

The Reformation probably deserves a year of sermons?

This week and the next two weeks, I want to look at three areas the Reformation transformed – but areas we have to remain vigilant in.

Those areas are:

The Gospel  
The Word  
Corporate Worship

This morning we are going to look at what is really at the core of Reformation truth:

### **The rediscovery of the Gospel.**

And my point for this morning's message is this:

### **The light of the Gospel leads to assurance and to fruit**

There are so many facets of the gospel that we could look at – but in our time together, I want to look at these two.

### **The light of the Gospel leads to assurance**

### **The light of the Gospel leads to fruit**

First:

### **The light of the Gospel leads to assurance**

Perhaps the verses that are most intimately associated with the Reformation are Romans Chapter 1, verses 16 through 17:

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 (in the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith."

These verses remind us of two great gospel realities:

### **The Great Problem**

### **The Awesome Solution**

What is the Great problem?

Basically, it is this:

God is holy and man is sinful.

Luther knew this. Over a number of years, a realisation of the inadequacies of sacraments and indulgences to deal with sin had been growing on Luther.

For years he had been studying books like Galatians and especially Romans.

It all came to a head as he prepared to teach his way through the book of Romans, he got to verse 17 of chapter 1 and ran smack into a brick wall.

In verse 16 Paul cried – I am **not** ashamed of the gospel – the good news.

Awesome! So what is this good news?

You read on to verse 17 and Paul seems to say that the gospel – the good news is that God is righteous!

What?

Luther couldn't grasp how anyone could ever call this good news! Far from being good news – this verse was the stuff of Luther's worst nightmares. God is righteous, God is holy, God is a consuming fire.

The last thing Luther wanted to hear was that God was righteous. Luther tells us what was going through his mind as he read this verse:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. ... I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, ... [He is] also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!"

Luther knew that as far as monks went – he was a pretty good monk – but he also knew this was nowhere near good enough.

He still battled sin – lust, greed, anger.

Luther had tried everything to deal with the sin within. He had fasted, prayed, beaten himself – done everything.

The sin was still there so when he was reminded that God is righteous – all he could picture was this little monk being incinerated before the searing holiness of God and banished to hell for his failures.

Woe is Luther? Who can stand before a consuming fire?

Luther found no solace in the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that said that the meritorious work of Christ and the superabundant merit of the saints – had created a Treasury of Merit.

How could a few hail Mary's and few chipped teeth and bit of rotting wood ever take away His sin before a holy God?

He saw the sale of indulgences for what it was – a money grab.

To give you some idea of how crass it was – imagine if next Sunday Dave stood up here and announced.

Brothers and sisters – you have a problem – sin – the church has a problem – we need a church building in Logan – but here is the solution.

God has given the keys to the kingdom to the church. As ministers of the church we have the right to sell forgiveness – and here is our price list.

Adultery	\$50,000
Don't attend church for a year	\$30,000
Lying	\$10,000
Greed	\$5,000
Watching porn	\$5,000
Anger	\$4,000
Gluttony	\$4,000
Other	Price on request
Absolution of all sin for a year	\$100,000

**As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the church from Logan springs.**

This is just plain crass – it diminishes sin and the holiness of God. You could only believe it if you wanted to believe it.

But if you did believe it – I tell you the money would roll in and we would be building St Peter's in Logan.

I trust no one would ever give such a list a second thought – but beware – there are variations of this abounding today. The sales pitch may have become more sophisticated. But, in one way or another, there are no shortage of churches peddling a variation of this today. They control the way to heaven and for a price – money, works, effort – it can be yours. And we should remember that in most ways – the essential teaching of the Roman Catholic Church has not changed since the days of Luther.

The problem is that this only works if you can keep the focus away from how holy God is and how sinful we are.

As soon as either of these thoughts – or Lord forbid – both – begin to intrude – you know that a few pieces of silver and a few hail Marys cannot possibly pay for our mountain of sin against a holy God.

If you consider the glory and holiness of God – you know with absolute certainty – a trillion dollars could not possibly atone for the smallest of sins.

What is the whole world to a God who speaks and the universe exists?

Luther realised this – and he saw no way out.

His conscience continued to beat on him and tell him that the news that God was righteous was so far from being good news that he was driven to despair over it. He says:

I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.

Woe is me – how can I find freedom from my sins before a holy God?

There are many Christians today – and perhaps some here this morning – who find themselves in Luther's dilemma.

When their mind turns to the holiness of God – all their sins – their shameful secrets – their failures – come to mind – and all their assurance of salvation melts away. They know the cross is mighty – but in the face of the holiness of God – their sin seems mightier.

But Luther says:

Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.

If Paul says this is good news – then Luther reasoned he had to be missing something. So, he beat upon Paul – he prayed, he begged God to show him what this verse actually meant.

Finally, God granted Luther insight into the proper way to understand this passage.

The Roman Catholic Church had no answers – none to the question of sin. But here in the pages of Scripture Luther found the answer.

### **The Awesome Solution**

Which is:

### **The Grace of God and the Gift of Righteousness**

Luther wrote this:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words ... I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. ... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

Hallelujah! This verse wasn't talking about the fact that God is righteousness.

It was talking about the good news that there is a way for sinful man to be made righteous.

Yes God is righteous – but Paul tells us that the most awesome news ever uttered is that God gifts His righteousness to sinners – through Jesus.

Luther studied this word righteousness and found that its use was not just in a moral sense but even more so in a legal sense. Because of Jesus' death – God can declare us righteous – holy – just.

A paraphrase of this verse might read like this, "In the Gospel, the fact that man can be declared righteous before God is revealed."

And at this – the Reformation was born.

Luther pondered long on this and realised at the heart of this is what he termed the "joyous exchange."

Christ who is holy and without sin – works a great exchange – he takes our sin and our shame – and as a free gift to those who have faith – He gifts His righteousness and holiness.

2 Corinthians 5:21:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

So when we come before God – we are literally clothed with the righteousness of Jesus.

Luther was also stunned to find that this was actually the way Christians had long understood this verse – it is just that it had been lost in the time of darkness. He wrote this:

Later I read Augustine's *The Spirit and the Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he, too, interpreted God's righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when He justifies us.

Luther realised that we should have no fear because it is not our works we rely on but Christ's.

Clothed in Christ's righteousness no attack of the enemy can prevail for His righteousness is perfect.

The assurance of our salvation does not rest on anything Luther did, you have done, I have done – it rests entirely upon the work of Jesus. And since He lived a perfect life and died under the wrath of God and cried – It is finished – our salvation is forever settled, unchangeable, secure.

Romans 5:1:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now Romans 1:16 made sense:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel – the good news – for it is the power of God for salvation – Amen! – to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

The gospel can actually save because it relies on Christ's work not ours.

It is not that we make our confession, pay our penance – but then when we sin again we exist in a state of peril until we can get right again.

Every sin – past, present and future – is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more.

If you have faith in Christ – He gifts you His righteousness.

By grace – accessed through faith we stand – not on the flimsy, supposed relics of saints but on the righteousness of Christ and Christ alone.

That leads us to the second facet of the gospel I want to look at.

### **The light of the Gospel leads to fruit**

In 1510 Luther visited Rome. For years he had longed to visit to the Holy City.

When he finally got there, he was shocked at what he found. Far from a holy city it was arguably the most immoral city of its day.

Most priests lived in open immorality and cared only for riches not for Christ. The Pope of the day Julius II was sick with syphilis. He had never tried to hide his insatiable immorality, publicly proclaimed his legions of illegitimate children and made no secret of the fact that he had bribed his way to the papacy. At Lent, when Catholics were meant to fast he made a point of gorging himself.

Luther was shocked to the core of his being. He wrote:

- If there is a hell, Rome was built on it.
- Let me get out of this terrible dungeon.

- I took onions to Rome and brought back garlic.

It should not surprise us. What if you lived your life based on the teaching of indulgences:

Do you think this would encourage holiness or sin?

If you can purchase or earn forgiveness for every sin – will it cause you to sin or live holy?

What if you bought absolution of sin for a whole year? What would your life look like?

We know our hearts – our lives wouldn't be pretty.

Sin was devalued – and the holiness of God was greatly diminished.

I think many of us would look at this list and say – bargain.

But – what if the path to heaven lies through the great exchange – swapping the filthy rags of your life for the holiness of Christ?

Some might argue – if it is a free gift – then it is a free pass to sin all you want.

**Not at all!** What Luther realised is that grace is actually a deterrent to sin and a powerful spur to holiness.

Romans 6:15:

What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

In fact, true salvation changes us so that we hate our sin and long to bear good fruit.

And this is writ all over the pages of Scripture. We saw it beginning to end in the book of James.

James 2:17:

So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

And consider these verses from Ephesians 2:1–10:

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins ... But God, being rich in mercy, ... made us alive together with Christ. ... For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

You are not saved by works or indulgences or sacraments – but by grace – through faith – by the gift of the righteousness of Christ.

A gift no one can earn, buy or deserve.

But this does not mean that good works are irrelevant. God transformed us and prepared us to walk in good works.

Listen to Luther:

Truly, if faith is there, [the one justified] cannot hold back; he proves himself, breaks out into good works, confesses and teaches this gospel before the people, and stakes his life on it.

If you have faith that leads to salvation – you just have to burst out with good works. You can't help it.

When we realise the impossibly awesome gift of God – that He has given us the righteousness of Christ – out of utter gratitude and love we long to please God.

Yesterday Cobus and Shavana were married. At their reception – Cobus's dad described the time he flew up to meet Shavana.

They met at the Coast and spent time together.

He said he had one word to describe his son's behaviour toward Shavana that day – sickening.

Cobus was fawning over Shavana – couldn't do enough for her.

But that's what love does – we seek to serve the one we love.

What Luther came to understand is that when we are saved, when Christ comes to live in us – He changes us from within – our desires become holy – our lives are His – and we long to do good works to please God.

Galatians 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

True salvation means the old self that longed for sin is dead – and the new creation – the new us – longs to please our heavenly Father.

We are His workmanship. God took us – dead in our trespasses and sins – living in the passions of our flesh – by nature children of wrath – and He made us new creatures with a new heart. A heart that longs to please God.

The Lord transformed us so that we would walk in the good works He had prepared for us.

This doesn't mean we don't sin. We do.

What it means is that we hate our sin and strive to deal with it.

But we know that there is One who has paid the penalty for our sin.

Think about it. You sin. You fight with your wife and say some ugly things.

You hate your sin – so what do you do?

It is not that you need to go out and feed the homeless and comfort the sick and somewhere there is a divine scale that says – yeah – fair enough – those things cancel each other out.

What Luther came to grasp is that God is so holy, so glorious – it is impossible for us to pay for or wipe away the smallest sin against a holy God.

But – we need to realise our sin is already paid – we confess our sin and strive to kill our sin.

But, 1 John 1:9:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The righteousness of Christ pays for our fight with our wife and our ugly words – whether we run out and feed the poor or not.

But our gratitude – our desire to please Him – our sheer joy at our salvation – compels us to confess our sins and strive to live holy – knowing that Christ has paid it all.

**And** one other crucial fruit. Matthew 5:16:

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Our good works are seen by a watching world. Your transformed life is one of the most powerful evangelistic tools there is.

Paul speaks of this in 1 Thessalonians 1:5–10:

Our gospel came to you [Thessalonians] not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. ... And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, ... so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report

concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Here is Paul's argument.

The Thessalonians heard the gospel. It inspired incredible fruit in them.

Such that they had to go out and tell others about this gospel.

He says this was so stunning that when they turned up in places to share the gospel – they said – don't bother we have already heard about the power of God from those Thessalonians.

We saw them turn from their idols – greed, immorality, other gods – to serve the living and true God.

We know about this stuff. We have seen and heard the gospel in them.

Brothers and sisters. The gospel is the power of God to save.

### **The light of the Gospel leads to Assurance**

I know many of you struggle with assurance.

If you do – go back to the gospel. Let it permeate your heart.

When you know that you will stand before a Holy God and you will stand not in your own efforts but in Christ's glorious righteousness – the result is that you have an assurance of your salvation that cannot be shaken.

Luther came to understand this.

He went from a Monk fearful before God – beating Himself to deal with sin to one who rested secure in the knowledge that he was in Christ. He wrote:

Therefore, let every man so practice with himself, that his conscience may be fully assured that he is under grace .... And if he feels in himself any wavering or doubting, let him exercise his faith and wrestle against this doubting, ... so that he may be able to say: I know that I am accepted, and that I have the Holy Spirit; not for my own worthiness, my work, my merit, but for Christ's sake.

Brothers and sisters – if you understand the gospel – it removes our doubts because we stand on Christ and Christ alone.

### **The light of the Gospel leads to fruit**

I want to ask you a question.

Where would you and I be today if the history of Martin Luther went like this:

Luther struggled with assurance and sin.

Luther anguished over Romans 1:17 – and finally the truth penetrated his hard head.

By grace – through faith – O Martin how glorious – I can have the righteousness of Christ. I can have assurance of salvation.

And he was so overjoyed at this truth that Luther just exalted in it all his days – telling almost no one – or at best from time to time shared it with a few close comrades.

There would be no Reformation. No light after the darkness. No *Grace Bible Church*.

But true salvation leads to true fruit. Luther was a changed man. His life changed in every way – including deep abiding passion to make this gospel known.

He wrote:

Moreover, I gladly hear, read, sing and write of [Christ], and I desire nothing more than that his Gospel may be known to the whole world, and that many may be converted unto him.

He had to tell the world.

If you are a child of the Reformation – a citizen of heaven by grace and grace alone – then you have to tell the world.

It has to change you within – give you a joy – a desire for good works – including the proclamation of the gospel.

If you are unsure how to do that then our Adult Sunday School is the place for you. This term – first service Rhoi is showing us how we can share this awesome truth.

So don't just rejoice at the recovery of gospel truth – let it loose – in you and in the world.

May we be those that continue the legacy of the gospel of grace in our generation.