

<Read text: Isaiah 40:6-8>.

A great number of blessings came out of the time of the Reformation. The truths that were brought back to light give us peace and confidence in our God as our one and only Savior. Peace and confidence knowing that our salvation is accomplished entirely by his work alone, without our needing to contribute (or being able to ruin it). You may have your favorite *solà* that came out of the time of the Reformation, one that brings you peace and comfort above the others. Of course they are all essential and necessary, but today I'd like to look at the one where it begins, the one that seemed nearly lost at the time of the Reformation, the one where our confidence truly begins; the unchanging, unchangeable word of God.

Everything we need to know about how we are saved is recorded there. The words themselves carry the power of the Holy Spirit to bring us to faith. God could have sent a savior, Jesus could have died for our sins and rose to life for our benefit but without the word of God to bring this to us, to teach us about this blessing and cause us to believe it, it would all be for nothing. This was nearly the case at the time of Luther. The Bible was not in the hands of the people, they were not allowed to read it, there were told they could not understand it. In fact, the Bible was barely in the hands of the clergy. Rather than using the original writings in Hebrew or Greek, they insisted that their Latin version, the Vulgate, was the only authentic form of scripture.

But even that hardly mattered since the Bible was the last place they looked for divine truth. Traditions and council decrees handed down could supersede what the Bible clearly said, and above them all was the Pope, a sinful man chosen by sinful men that now suddenly could speak in God's place whenever the mood so struck him.

And what came out of this mess, where God's word was buried and man's whims were allowed to become doctrine, was a system of spiritual oppression and despair that gripped those caught in it or caused a false sense of self-righteousness that masked the corruption lurking underneath. Christ's sacrifice began your salvation, they taught, it is now up to you to finish it. Your sins are paid for, now you need to work at making yourself holy so God will accept you. And if you don't do it in time, you'll suffer after death until you're purified.

But when is it enough? When are you sure that you're really bound for heaven? Where is the peace? And we're probably all familiar with the chief offense of the day that sparked the Reformation; the practice of indulgences. Spend a little coin and that night of drunkenness can be made up for by someone else on your behalf. Go ahead, the Pope's got plenty of grace stored up from the saints to hand out, you just have to sacrifice the money to have it. Now you don't even have to work your way out of your sin, you can just buy your way out. All of these things turned people away from looking at their Savior and instead looked to themselves for salvation. Take a moment to imagine your spiritual life under such a system.

Luther was only a man. He did great things by the power of the Lord, but he was a sinful man. We praise God that through Luther, the original words of Scripture were reopened. We praise God that the word of God was put in everyone's hands, in a language they could each understand. And we praise God that through that delivery and study, the truth of his message of salvation was restored to his people. The firm message, transmitted by God's recorded word, that salvation is a free gift through faith in Jesus Christ as our resurrected Savior. This came about because of God's Word. The dark days came because it was neglected and misused, the peace and confidence we have now came through bringing that word back to light.

So my brothers and sisters I ask you a question; how do you treasure the word of our God? How have you shown that it is your direct conduit to your Lord, and to the eternal life that he offers. How you show that when the word is read or spoken to you, God himself is speaking to you? How do you demonstrate that these are not just idle words for you, they are your life?

Perhaps we should ask about the ways we haven't treasured it. Ways we've trampled it under our feet when we found it convenient or just plain ignored it. Is hearing God's word a priority to you, a treasure you value so much that you keep it front and center? Or do you take God's directive to be in his word daily as more of a suggestion that people with plenty of free time can bother about? Me? I've got work and family, household repairs and trips to take. I'll listen to him on the Sundays I can be there, that should be enough.

Or what about when God says something that offends our human sensibilities, or our American notions of pride, fairness or equality? How do we react when God speaks contrary to our culture on human sexuality, divorce and marriage, roles of men and women, closed communion, our daily bread or just being told the point of life isn't to accumulate enough wealth to retire early and enjoy life? When we hit something that clashes with our notions, do we politely shrug it off or

do we accept that God really does know best and his Word to us should be honored? Are you going to listen to what he says or will you keep your own opinion and just nod your head at church when the subject comes up...or perhaps depart and find a church that agrees with you?

In ways that we would call large and small, we haven't valued God's word for what it is. Maybe you haven't taken marker to the pages and crossed off bits you didn't like, maybe you haven't inked up the margins with stuff God should've put in there, but we're all guilty of changing God's Word to suit our own purposes when the situation strikes us. We've sought to ignore it, change it, add to it, subtract from it and do whatever we need to in order to put it in line with how we want to live our lives and yet still (for now) keep Jesus in there somehow so we're still safe for the future right?

But of the two of you, you and God, which is the one that changes and which is the one that doesn't? You know that answer. We may fool ourselves into thinking we can outsmart God from time to time, that we can do better than him, improve on what he wrote. We may be tempted to compromise his truth for selfish reasons or even for seemingly noble reasons like not offending people with his truth. But the fact is that we are grass, and all our glory is like the flowers of the field. An impressive sight, something nice to look at. But then the breath of the Lord blows and it is dead and gone.

How strong do you consider something that can be utterly destroyed with a breath? How does that compare to what you think of yourself? Remember what you are in the sight of the Lord before you start to think yourself above him and his ways. You may want to think his ways are not fair or proper or are restrictive. You may want to change or ignore parts of what he says to make your life better. But it won't work. The word of the Lord is unchangeable, and trying to do so will only put yourself and others in harm's way. The word of the Lord stands forever. You do not. Remember yourself and abandon your pride. Even without your sin, you are not God. You cannot stand before him, you cannot stand up to him. He is eternal and unchanging, you are not.

And with that humble attitude approach the word of the Lord again and hear God speak to you. Hear his unchanging words that say to you again and again, "I love you." Hear him say over and over to your sin, "I forgive you." Hear his unchanging cry from the cross, "It is finished!" Listen to him promise you without fail, "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me will live even though he dies. And he who lives and believes in me will never die." Why would you ever want to change what God has to say to us there in his word? It is a rich tapestry of love from our God to you...if you pluck at just one thread it all unravels and becomes meaningless. But all together it shows us the great picture of a God who so loved us that he gave himself to set you free.

This unchanging word of God will always be there for us who treasure it. It cannot be crushed by mankind. It cannot be lost. It stands forever. In judgment God may take it away from people who abuse it, he may allow its light to dim in history from time to time but it cannot be destroyed. It stands forever, unchanging. Others may abuse it, others may lose it, but we can have confidence that it will stand. This is not a license for carelessness in our handling of it. We treasure it for what it is, we treat it with respect as the word of the God who saves us. But we needn't be afraid of losing it either.

Where something is certain, there peace and confidence can be found. This is our treasure of the gospel truth, of the word of God. It is, like our God himself, unchanging. There will never be a day where we wake up to discover that God now hates us. Or where God now expects work from you to complete your salvation. Rather, this word will always assure you that are God's own dear child, bought and paid for with the price of his blood. You are washed clean in his waters and have been claimed as his own. Each page of his word is an unchanging letter of love, written to you and signed in his precious blood.

Certainly we do not worship the Word. We worship God. We praise him and thank him for what he has done to us. But the word of God is the means he has chosen to come to us, it is the way he uses to enter our hearts, bring us to faith and teach us of the salvation he won us. It is the way he says to us daily, "I love you." For what it is, we treasure it, we value it properly in our lives. We seek it regularly, we listen to our God through it constantly. We look to understand more and more what he has to tell us in it. And what our God says, we accept without complaint or reservation because it is the unchanging word of our God who loves us.

Brothers and sisters treasure what you have from your Lord. Treasure the salvation given to you freely. Treasure the faith that has been created in you. Treasure the love of God that made him do this for you without your earning or deserving it. And treasure God's unchanging, unchangeable word, that you may have all these treasures as yours for eternity. Amen.