

October 29, 2017

“The Recovery of the Scriptures”

2 Chronicles 34:1-33

FCF: Our struggle with the absolute authority of God’s Word

PROPOSITION: (anchor) The recovery of the Scriptures is a gift of God’s grace.
(magnet) And it should be gladly received as such.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

In the context of a worship service, is it right to take time to examine the life of a mortal man? Well, praise can be found in any of God’s image bearers for we all reflect something of Him. That’s true of every person. Pushing this further, how much so in the lives of His people?

Consider this quote from John Piper ([READ The Legacy of Sovereign Joy](#)):

God ordains that we gaze on his glory, dimly mirrored in the ministry of his flawed servants. He intends for us to consider their lives and peer through the imperfections of their faith and behold the beauty of their God.

The point being there is so much to be gained here. If we will have the humility to listen.

But that begs a question, “Why Martin Luther?” I would say, “Because of what he was about.” By that, I mean two things. The absolute supremacy of God’s grace. And the absolute authority of God’s Word. It’s the second we’re honing in on. And it’s a lesson needed still today.

SERMON INTRODUCTION: [2 Chronicles 34:1-21](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

This Tuesday marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Why should we care? Let me give a quick summary. Consider the impact of the Reformation upon politics - the unravelling of the bond between the church and the state that had been so dominant through the medieval period and so encouraging the proliferation of democracy. Or the family - marriage no longer a second tier thing. Or culture - no sacred versus secular, all of life to be lived “coram deo”. Or the church - the sacraments and priesthood, the laity and music, the sermon. All of this was brought on by the Reformation. Western civilization would be unrecognizable without it.

And, at the risk of oversimplification, it all started with Martin Luther. Now, there are many ways to go here. We could talk of his courage. Or his marriage - the story of this union of a former priest with a former nun. Or his insights into prayer. Or the “theology of glory” versus the “theology of the cross”. Or the great sola’s of the Reformation. That is, how we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Luther pressed all that as hard as he could.

But I want to consider the foundation beneath - “sola Scripture”, the Bible alone as the ultimate authority for faith and life. This was not a new teaching but something very old. It was not an innovation but a rediscovery - a sweet recovery. Indeed, the recovery of the Scriptures, as we can see in our text, is a gift of God’s grace. And it really should be gladly received as such.

How so? In three ways - by God’s means, of God’s news, and through God’s Word.

I. BY GOD’S MEANS

So, first, the recovery of the Scriptures through God’s means. That is, through whom will He do this? In this case, it was King Josiah, whose labors at reform were deep and thorough.

A) *The Sensible*

What do we know of him? He was the last good king of Judah. And one of the greatest.

1. Godly lineage

In some ways, his being used in this way was sensible. For his was a godly lineage (**READ v.2**).

2. Godly example

He had a godly lineage. And a godly example in his great-grandfather, King Hezekiah, a man of great courage - willing to press ahead with needed reforms and to stand up against his enemies.

B) *The Surprising*

So seeing Josiah come along in this way is sensible. But it's also somewhat surprising.

1. Ungodly influence

For there were ungodly influences in his life as well. His grandfather, King Manasseh, and his father, King Amon - both of whom were described as having done evil in the sight of the LORD.

2. External pressure

Compounding this, there was the external pressure of the political turmoil of the time. Assyria's power was waning. Babylon was on the rise. And Egypt was plotting as to how to fill the void.

Yet, in the midst of all this, God's chosen means of reform was young King Josiah.

Illustration:

Not a likely candidate. Nor, centuries later, was Martin Luther. Early on, Luther was studying to be a lawyer. But in 1505, caught in a thunderstorm, he cried out, "*Help, St. Anne! I will become a monk.*" He did. And, later, a priest. Which is what he was for the next 12 years leading up to October 31, 1517 - the day he posted his 95 Theses on the Wittenberg church door.

He was not a likely candidate. Not then nor later through the Peasant's Revolt, his anti-Semitic writings, and his off-color comments. And Luther knew that. He wrote (**READ quote**):

We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure...I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.

Application:

Time and again over the course of human history, God has shown His delight in working through unlikely means. And nothing has changed. Think of the implications. It doesn't matter where we've come from. It doesn't matter what we've done. He can work through any of us.

Even in that sense, the recovery of the Scriptures is a gift of God's grace. Simply in the sweet and surprising means by which He has done this. And it should be gladly received as such.

II. OF GOD'S NEWS

Which brings me to the second point, the recovery of God's news. That is, its contents, the very message of the gospel, the good and glorious news of His sovereign grace at work.

A) *What Was Discovered*

Josiah's reforms meant tearing down idols and repairs to the Temple. What was found?

1. The book itself

(**READ v.14**) The Book of the Law was likely a scroll of Deuteronomy or at least part of it.

2. How it was lost

How could it have been lost? The neglect of the prior kings and the apostasy of the people.

B) *What It Contained*

What did it contain? What was its message? You get a sense of this in Josiah's response.

1. Partial picture

(**READ vv.19, 21**) So, partially, it was a message of judgment, of God's discipline of His people.

2. Fuller picture

I say "partially" because it demands we take a step back and consider the fuller picture. There was certainly warning here but also wonder. The LORD had long before taken the initiative with Israel. Theirs was then but to respond to His love with faith and obedience. They had failed to do so. And the LORD, in His love, was not ignoring this relationship but engaging them in it.

The point being that the greater message was one of the good news of God's great love.

Illustration:

It was the very message that transformed Martin Luther. It's the question of salvation. Keep in mind the context. His training as a Roman Catholic priest told him that our problem is really one of demerits. The solution then is merits, of works of obedience. It was a gospel of works done in this life. And then the purging via purgatory for what was left over at death.

Luther described a realization that came around the time of the 95 Theses (**READ quote**):

As a monk I led an irreproachable life. Nevertheless I felt that I was a sinner before God. My conscience was restless, and I could not depend on God being propitiated by my satisfactions. Not only did I not love, but I actually hated the righteous God who punished sinners...Thus a furious battle raged within my perplexed conscience, but meanwhile I was knocking at the door of this particular Pauline passage (Romans 1:17b), earnestly seeking to know the mind of the great apostle. Day and night I tried to meditate upon the significance of these words: 'The righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."' Then, finally, God had mercy on me, and I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that gift of God by which a righteous man lives, namely, faith, and that this sentence - The righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel - is passive, indicating that the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: 'The righteous shall live by faith.' Now I felt as though I had been reborn altogether and had entered Paradise. In the same moment the face of the whole of Scripture became apparent to me.

Application:

Taking to heart this "alien righteousness", Luther's heart was free. Nothing has changed. There is still no better news. The righteousness of God is never earned. It is always given.

In that sense, the recovery of the Scriptures is, again, truly a gift of God's glorious grace. For its timeless timely message is one of grace. And it should be gladly received as such.

III. THROUGH GOD'S WORD

Which takes us to the third point, the recovery of the news through a recovery of the Word. For how can the message be heard if the Book is lost? We see this with Josiah's context. And here it becomes not just a question of salvation but a question of truth and authority.

A) *The Competing Ideas*

In the backdrop to everything in 2 Chronicles 34, there is this swirl of competing ideas.

1. Multiple sources

The cry for political and practical expediency, for religious formalism and popular syncretism.

2. Terrible confusion

And this swirl created terrible confusion. For it seemed there was no ultimate authority.

B) *A Singular Voice*

But then Hilkiah the priest found the Book. And into the swirl came a singular voice.

1. Transcendent

This was a transcendent voice, speaking above and beyond the others, drowning them all out.

2. Divine source

How? It stood alone as being from no man or human system but having a divine source. For the Book of the Law found in the house of the LORD was the Word of God. So it had to be heard.

We need this mislaid Word. And so the recovery of the Word is an act of God's grace.

Illustration:

The same was true in Luther's day. I mentioned earlier the gospel of works and the supposed role of purgatory in the purging of remaining sin. The Catholic Church had something else to offer - indulgences to be earned or bought to shorten time in purgatory for yourself or your loved ones. Which led to all kinds of abuses and corruption. Luther recognized that the whole system was unbiblical. Here's what he is quoted as saying at the Diet of Worms in 1521, defending what he had said in the 95 Theses and what he had written since ([READ quote](#)):

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound to the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.

I should add that a commitment to the Book is why Luther was committed to translating the New Testament from the original Greek into German - a project carried out after he was captured by friends on his way home from Worms and hidden away in the Wartburg Castle. That translation had more impact upon the German language than the King James Version did upon the English.

Application:

This is what the Reformers meant when they appealed to the idea of "sola Scriptura" - the Bible alone as our ultimate authority in faith and life. How is this relevant today? Think with me. We are still surrounded by competing truth claims - social media, music, film, blogs, ads, news. How can we sift through it? How can we know what is true? Nothing has changed. We still need an ultimate authority - a norm, standard, and criteria - by which we can really know.

Where is that to be found? Sola Scriptura. Not that we reject all insight from tradition or history but that we know its place. Not that we give way to a radical individualism claiming "I decide" all things but knowing the role of teachers and the need of community. The Bible is our only inerrant, infallible guide. Not the pope or councils. And not a guru or our feelings.

The recovery of the Scriptures is a gift of God's grace. And it should be received as such.

CONCLUSION:

Let me end with where we began. Why study the life and writings of Martin Luther? Why reflect on the impact of his life? For starters, we can relate to him. We might admire other giants of church history. But Luther is one we tend to like. Consider this. When asked which of his many works he would want to endure, he said just two - his classic, The Bondage of the Will, and his Small Catechism, written for children. Or consider these words, scribbled on a note the day before he died (**READ quote**), “*Let nobody suppose that he has tasted the Holy Scriptures sufficiently, unless he has ruled over the churches with the prophets a hundred years...We are beggars. That is true.*” For all Luther’s flaws, there was a sweet winsomeness to his life.

But, as far as why we should study and reflect here, there’s something more. And we have to say this with all seriousness. Martin Luther was a gift of God to the people of God for the glory of God. Gratitude and thanksgiving are then due to the giver of the gift. We are not venerating the saints. We are revering our Lord by admiring his servant. In fact, the reality is that it’s utterly dishonoring to Jesus to ignore His servant, Martin Luther. Or any other.

The recovery of the Scriptures is a gift of God’s grace. It always has been. And it always will be. We see that recovery through this man. And it should be gladly received as such.

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