

REFORMATION SUNDAY

October 29, 2017

Hebrews 10:35-39:

“Live By Faith Or Shrink Back?”

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“Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, ‘Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls (Hebrews 10:35-39).”

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Again, “do not throw away your confidence . . . My righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him! What we are learning in this text is that faith has “a double function.” Edward W. A. Koehler in *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* uses an illustration. He says, “Fire does two things: It consumes fuel, and it produces heat and light.” To say it in another way, the power of fire is in the fuel, but the evidence of the fire is found in what is produced - what is felt and seen - heat and light. He then goes on to define the double function of faith according to Scripture.

Regarding the first function of faith he writes, “it clings to the promise of God. It apprehends and receives what this promise offers, namely, the grace of God and the merits of Christ. Consequently, it justifies a believer before God. This is the *justifying and saving power of faith.*” Koehler is saying that the promises of God are to be understood as the fuel by which faith exists. Paul says, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law (Romans 2:28).”

When Luther was growing up, he was taught that God was a perfect being who demanded perfection. Knowing that he was a sinful human and far from perfect, Luther was convinced that a perfect God would never accept him but instead send him to everlasting hell. He was utterly terrified of God’s anger and judgment. Rome had taught him that the only way to heaven was to make God happy by doing good works. And so, Luther tortured himself by wondering if he could or would ever do enough. Driven into deep despair and afraid of dying, he joined an Augustinian monastery to work even harder to enter into the kingdom of heaven. To describe his state during this time, Luther called himself “the crazy saint.” He physically beat himself bloody, almost starved himself to death, made pilgrimages to work off the sins that he had committed, confessed his sins so that he wore out those who listened, and the list goes on.

Nothing that he did ever made him feel better. Finally, Luther was appointed to be a teacher of Scripture. Hardly anyone read or took the Bible seriously. He was irritated by the appointment. But God worked mightily in his life. As an old man in 1545, Luther recounts the point when he discovered the Gospel. Reading the Bible, he puzzled over the words recorded in Romans 1:17. There it reads, “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

When Luther came to the understanding that our righteousness comes by faith in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, he relates that in that moment it was as if the gates of paradise had been flung wide open. It was this faith that enabled him to face whatever he would have to face. Luther writes, “through faith in Christ . . . Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours . . . This is an infinite righteousness, and one that swallows up all sins in a moment, for it is impossible that sin should exist in Christ.”

Now regarding the second function of faith Koehler states, "faith produces something. It renews the sinner. St. Paul writes to the Galatians: '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.' (Galatians 2:20) and 'faith work[s] through love' (Galatians 5:6). This is the *sanctifying power of faith*." So, thinking back to the illustration of fire - like fire, the second function of faith is that it produces something that can be perceived.

In April 1521, four years after he had nailed the 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church, Martin Luther rode away from his home town at Wittenberg to attend the Imperial Diet at Worms. His life was in danger. Already he had been condemned as a heretic. And although he was given some assurance of safety, everyone knew that there could be ways around the "guarantee." He came to the Diet in order to give an answer for his "heretical views" before the new Emperor Charles V, and he expected a hostile reception. The faith that God had given to Luther did not shrink back, nor was it destroyed. Rather he persevered in the faith as evidenced by his exceedingly bold words at the close of the Diet:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason . . . I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand. May God help me. Amen.

Private conferences were held to determine Luther's fate. Before a decision was reached, Luther left. Despite the agreement that he could return home safely, it was privately understood that Luther would soon be arrested and punished. During his return to Wittenberg, he disappeared. Those who were close to Luther knew that he was not dead, but the vast majority of people assumed that he had met his end and were further threatened with many penalties to get rid of everything considered "Luther." Those who lived at the time called Luther's trial at Worms a re-enactment of the passion of Christ. Albrecht Dürer reflected in his diary: "I know not whether he lives or is murdered, but in any case he has suffered for the Christian truth. If we lose this man, who has written more clearly than any other in centuries, may God grant his spirit to another."

Indeed, Luther suffered for the Christian truth. What was it that gave him, or for that matter so many others throughout the history of the church, the ability to stand when it feels as if all is lost? Luther remained steadfast because he had been touched and convicted by the promises of God. The words of Paul are most appropriate here (Romans 1:16-17): "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 the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" The good news of the cross of Christ and the forgiveness of sins changes everything in our lives. It is so overwhelmingly powerful in all that it promises that nothing else can compete with it. It is so great that we would rather die and lose everything here than to lose him and the eternal future that is ours . . . or, would we?

Would we really give up everything for the faith? As sons and daughters of the Reformation we would like to think that we would stand for Christ and all that he has given - no matter what. We would like to think that we would risk life and limb, suffer and die, sacrifice every pleasure for the treasure in Jesus. And yet, how often do we fail in what would be considered the small things? How hard does it often become when the only thing required of us is to say "no" to our selfish, sinful desires? How many times have we kept our mouths shut, or stutter and stammer around when we are bid to make a good confession

because we know full well that our good confession could very well cause people to hate us and cause us trouble in life? Just how certain are we that we would really stand for the truth when we can hardly keep ourselves attentive to the truth in church and Bible classes? Just how awake are we really in Christ when we can hardly pray without drifting?

Those are hard questions, and there are plenty more we could ask, but I think you get the point. It all can be summarized with these words in 1 Corinthians 10:12-13: "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." Luther remarks:

When a person accepts faith, it does not occur to him that it is a weighty and difficult matter. He looks upon it as a little child . . . easy to carry . . . He does not find out how heavy the little child was until he came to the spot where the water was deepest . . . Even so it was with the Gospel. When the message began to spread, the waters rose: pope, bishops, princes, and the mad mob rose in opposition. Not until then did we feel that the little child was very heavy to bear [we felt as if we would drown] . . . Now he who has picked up Christ, this little Child, must either bear Him entirely through the water to the opposite shore, or he must drown. No alternative exists . . . Therefore we will go through the water with this Christ even if it seems as if we could not make it. For we have the promise . . . that Christ intends to effect something extraordinary through our suffering. In the world, He says (John 16:33), you will experience pressure and trouble, but in Me you will have peace. Again, St. Paul says (1 Cor. 10:13): We have a faithful God, who helps us out of trouble . . . to which we cling and let the waters roar and rush as they please (*What Luther Says*, pages 358-359).

Indeed, the righteous will live by faith! May God forgive us in Christ where we have failed. And, in the forgiveness of sins, may we become in him those who have faith and preserve their souls, and not of those who shrink back and are destroyed.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott