

WHAT IF THE REFORMATION NEVER HAPPENED?

What if I won the lottery? What if I grew up to be a professional basketball player? What if my teacher never gave me homework? What if you could travel back in time? Some people are fascinated with what if questions. Others don't like them at all. Yet, many people like to speculate on how things would be different if something didn't happen or if something else did happen. Whether you like what if questions or not, I am going to ask one this morning regarding the festival of the Reformation, a day in which we confessional Lutherans thank God for opening up Martin Luther's eyes to the truth of the Gospel. Luther brought back to the people the message of free and full forgiveness through the perfect sacrifice of our Savior Jesus. To show how important this event was and how it affects our lives even today, let's think about "what if," what life would be like for us, how our lives would be different, if the events of the Reformation had never happened. If the Reformation never happened, the truth that we are saved by faith alone, by grace alone, by Scripture alone might still be hidden.

One of the first songs that many of us learned as little children is "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." How many of you own a Bible? Is your Bible written in the original languages of Greek and Hebrew or in English? It's English, right? If your Bible was not written in English, you would have to trust your spiritual leaders who were trained in these other languages to tell you the truths of the Bible. You couldn't be like the New Testament Bereans who listened to the apostle Paul preach and then went home and checked in their Bibles to make sure that what Paul preached was true. By the grace of God, you have a Bible that you can read and study. It's true that many people act as though the Bible were written in some foreign language because they hardly ever open it but we do have it at our fingertips.

When Luther was growing up in Germany, the people did not have this blessing because it was not translated in the German language. They simply had to believe what they were told. One of the results of the Reformation was that Luther translated the entire Bible into the German language. The Bible spread throughout Europe. The majority of our ancestors came to our country from Europe. They brought their German Bibles with them which eventually were translated into English. What if the Reformation never happened? We may not have Bibles translated for us to read and study.

If that were true, we may very well have the same beliefs about God as the people at Luther's time had. As a little boy, Luther didn't learn to sing "Jesus loves me, this I know" like the boys and girls here at Zion can sing. You might say, "Of course he didn't. It wasn't written yet." That's true but even if it had been written, he wouldn't have sung it because he didn't grow up knowing Jesus loved him. In fact, he didn't think God liked him at all. The devil had convinced the leaders of the church to paint a picture of God that they thought would get the people to behave better. So the picture of God that they painted was a God who wore this scowl on his face and got angry at them every time they sinned; an angry God whom they would one day have to stand face to face with. Imagine a child doing something wrong and asking his parent, "Is God mad at me? Is God going to punish me?" and the parent then saying, "What do you think? God is holy and he saw what you did." Talk about being afraid of God. Luther was terrified. This fear led Luther to enter a monastery to be ordained as a priest. He hoped by doing this, he would find peace with God. He didn't because as hard as he tried not to sin, he kept on sinning. He thought with each sin he committed God was getting angrier and angrier at him. Just think for a moment how awful it would be thinking God didn't love you because of your sins. Just think how you would feel if the only picture you have of God in your mind was that he was mad at you! I can't imagine how that would feel. If the Reformation never happened, this is the picture of God we might be seeing. How awful and sad it would be not being able to sing with confidence "Jesus loves me, this I know."

If we couldn't sing that, then that would mean we would not know the way to heaven. Most people at Luther's time didn't know because they were taught that forgiveness and salvation were not free gifts from God through faith in Christ Jesus. Forgiveness had to be earned by what you do or purchased by paying for masses or buying

indulgences, pieces of paper stating your sins or the sins of your loved ones were forgiven and your time in purgatory shortened. In other words, you had to do things or buy things in order to please your angry God and make up for what you did. Thus, you could never be certain whether or not you had ever done enough to make God happy enough to let you go to heaven. As you thought about your own death, you would have been uncertain and scared because you would soon be meeting this angry God whom you sinned against over and over again. If the Reformation had never happened, this is what we might have believed.

My friends, if God had not opened up Luther's eyes to the truth of Scripture, the central teaching of the Bible might still be hidden from us today. What is that central teaching? Paul tells us in our text, a passage that brought so much comfort to Luther. **We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.** Forgiveness and salvation cannot be earned or bought. We cannot be declared holy or righteous in God's sight by how we live. We are sinners who could never do anything to wipe out our sins or make us acceptable in God's sight. Paul wrote in our text. **Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.** Then a little later he wrote. **All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** I think a better translation of the Greek word for glory would be approval. Sin makes us fall way short of God's approval. Think about that for a moment. If it were possible for us to earn God's approval, to earn our own forgiveness and salvation, then I hate to say it but we have a mighty foolish God. He would have had his one and only Son come into this world for no reason. He would have allowed his Son to be beaten and bloodied, nailed to a cross, suffer the punishment of hell while on that cross for no reason. He would have told us to go out into the world and tell others about Jesus for no reason. Do you really think our God is that foolish? If he is, we are fools for believing in him.

My friends, we don't have a foolish God and we are not the fools. God made it very clear when he inspired Paul to write the words **we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.** This passage led Luther to the Gospel truth that we are saved by faith alone, by grace alone and by Scripture alone. Think about it. Everything involved with our salvation are gifts from God. God gave us the gift of his Holy Scriptures, his word in its truth and purity which alone reveals to us that Jesus is the only way to heaven. Jesus is a gift of God's grace. God gave up his son Jesus so that he could live and die to win our forgiveness and salvation. Faith in Jesus is the only way these blessings become ours, faith which is a gift of the Holy Spirit as Paul makes perfectly clear in his letter to the Ephesians. **For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, not by works.** What if the Reformation had not happened? We might not know what God in his grace did for us.

During the Civil War, a farmer in New York was drafted to serve in the Union Army. His wife had died and he was the only one caring for his young children. When word got out about this, a single man in the town offered to go to war in the farmer's place. Because of his children, the farmer accepted this man's offer. In the first battle this man was in, he was killed. When the farmer heard about this, he went to the battle scene, brought the dead man's body home and buried him in the village cemetery. He had these words inscribed on the tombstone. "He died for me."

"He died for me." This is the basic message of the Reformation, a message you and I might not know if the Reformation never happened. If the Reformation never happened, I can assure you that many people who are now in heaven would not be there for they would never have known that Jesus is the only way to heaven. If the Reformation never happened, there's a good chance that is where we would be spending our eternity. Thanks be to God that there are no ifs, ands or buts about it. The Reformation did take place. How blessed we are because it did! How blessed we are to know that God loves us and did all that was necessary to win our salvation? What Gospel treasures we have that we need to share with those who don't believe in Jesus as their Savior! What blessings we have in God's holy and inerrant Word, a priceless treasure through which the Holy Spirit creates and keeps us in our saving faith. My friends, this is the Word we need to hold on tightly to, the Word we must preserve it in all its truth and purity; the Word we pray that the Lord would keep us steadfast and faithful to. Amen.