

## **“Captive to the Word of God!” (John 8:31-32) Reformation Sunday 10/26/08**

In 1984, I visited the city of Worms. It's a tiny German city nestled on the Rhine – so tiny, in fact, I doubt tourists would ever go there were it not for just one thing. This was where Martin Luther was put on trial for his beliefs. This was where he was told to stop preaching salvation by grace through faith. And this was where Luther boldly replied: *"My conscience is captive to the Word of God... Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."*

Being a Lutheran pastor, *of course* I looked forward to seeing where all this happened. And I did see it... *kind of*. Unfortunately, the original palace is gone, but in its place there is now a park called the Heylshofgarten, and not only can you see where Luther once stood, you can actually stand there yourself – which, of course, I did.

At the time, I didn't think much about this—standing where Luther stood. But looking back, I find myself asking some questions I'd like all of us to ask ourselves today. Think what it would be like standing in Luther's place. Think what it would be like standing in Luther's *situation*. There's the emperor. There are your accusers. You know the stakes. Life or death could hang on what you say next. So ask yourself: What would it mean to say: *"My conscience is captive to the Word of God"*? Clearly, it made a world of difference for Luther to feel that way. The feeling went so deep no other response was possible. But what about you and me? Are we also captive to the Word of God?

We need to be! That's for sure! And maybe not for the reason we might think. Yes, we too live in times that demand a clear witness to the Gospel. Yes, we too live in times that challenge us to stand up for Christian values. But when it comes right down to it, there is an even greater reason why we need to be captive to the Word of God – and it is not just for the sake of mission own. For our own good we need to be captive to the Word of God!

Not captive in the negative sense, of course. Not captive in the sense of being held hostage, kept prisoner, or put in chains. And it's important to emphasize this, for we all know Christians who live like that, don't we? People who think Christianity is mainly rules, regulations...chains.

But no, we need to be captive in a positive sense – captivated, if you will. We need to be captive in the sense of being swept away, enthralled, even spellbound here [*head*] and here [*heart*]! Have you ever seen a person so captivated by the book they're reading that they just can't put it down? Have you ever seen sports fans so captivated by the game on TV that you could drop a bomb and they'd hardly notice? Have you ever seen young lovers so captivated by one another that it reshapes their whole outlook on life? That's a very different kind of captivity, isn't it? It's a joyful, life-giving captivity that we *let* seize us and take us where it will. And that's the kind of captivity we're talking about here.

In fact, it's an even better kind, for unlike captivity to a book, a game, or a person, being captive to the Word of God will never disappoint us or let us down. How could it? In His Word, God tells us personally: **"I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine!"** God tells us personally: **"By grace you have been saved through faith..."** God tells us personally: **"I will blot out your transgressions...and I will not remember your sins."** God tells us personally: **"Neither death nor life...nor anything in all creation will be able to separate" you from My love "in Christ Jesus."** Yes, that is God's Word to you and me...just for starters! And think what it would mean to be captive to that Word! For it to grip us so firmly here [*head*] and here [*heart*] that whenever we look in the mirror we always see a precious child of God; whenever we look at our challenges we always know God's grace will be sufficient; whenever we look ahead we can always trust God knows the plans He has for us to give us a future and a hope. Being gripped by that assurance here [*head*] and here [*heart*] – well, that's what made all the difference for Luther! That's what gave him the courage to say, *"Here I stand!"* And we can experience the same – when we are captive to the Word of God!

Now, what Christian wouldn't love to experience such assurance?! All of us would, of course! The question is: *How? How does it happen? How do we become captive to the Word of God?* And this brings us to our text, for Jesus actually tells us how. He says: **"If you continue in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."**

This text is familiar, I know. Perhaps too familiar. You may even be thinking: *I've heard lots of sermons on this text, and I don't remember any of them explaining how to experience God's love and assurance more deeply.* Possibly not. Most often, this passage is used to hammer home the importance of staying true to Scripture. I don't want to downplay that application. We need to stay true to Scripture. But what does that actually mean? The better we can answer that, the better we will see the "how to" we're looking for in this text.

Remember, Jesus spoke these words to people who thought they *were* staying true to Scripture. In fact, they were proud of their righteous track record – so proud they were sure it gave them a special "in" with God that would one day get them into heaven. But *were* they true to Scripture? Far from taking the Word to heart, they *overlooked* some important teachings – that in God's eyes, **"there is no one who is righteous, not even one;"** that, far from giving them an "in" with God, all their "righteousness" was "like filthy rags;" that what they really needed was a Savior, a Savior God Himself would send, a Savior who would be wounded for their transgressions, crushed for their iniquities, so that they could be forgiven, redeemed, saved. Yes, they thought they *were* staying true to Scripture, but sadly, that was not the case. The only way to really be true to Scripture is to take it all and take it all to heart.

Had they done that, they would have seen that Jesus' own Word builds on the Old Testament Scripture – indeed, fulfills it. He does not delete any moral teachings. He does not dilute the call to godliness. Far from it. What He does, though, is put grace front and center. He assures us that His love does not depend on our performance. He loves us unconditionally! He assures us that, even though we do sin, we can count on forgiveness – as a gift paid in full on the cross. Most of all, Jesus assures us that **“whoever hears My Word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has already passed from death to life.”** That is His Word to us. Not just the Law. Not even especially the Law. First and foremost, His Word to us is good news -- Gospel; His Word to us is grace – salvation as a gift; His Word to us is love – from a God who loved us so much **“He gave us His only Son”** and promised **“whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.”** Yes, that, first and foremost, is His Word to us. And Jesus promises that if we *continue* in this Word, we will *know* this truth, and this truth will make us *free*.

Yes, **“continue.”** Clearly, that's the key word here – the key to what we're looking for. If we **“continue”** in His Word that will lead us to experience His love at a deeper level. If we **“continue”** in His Word, we will experience the inner assurance that makes us free. If we **“continue...”** But still, how is that different from just hearing, knowing, or accepting the Word? And how exactly do we go about **“continuing”** in His Word? It is said that experience is the best teacher, so rather than explain, perhaps the best way to see how exactly this works is to go back and look at Luther's experience.

We all remember what Luther was like early on. He really felt he had to earn God's love. To him, that meant he had to fulfill God's law. And if he didn't do a good enough job – well, that meant he could just say bye-bye to any hopes of going to heaven. When Luther looked in the mirror, all he could see was a sinner – nothing but a sinner; a poor, miserable sinner unworthy of God's love.

But of course, you remember what happened next. One day Luther finally discovered the Gospel truth: that *even though* he was a sinner, God still loved him; in fact, God loved him unconditionally; loved enough to save him by grace through faith. What great news that was! What a great discovery! God loved him enough to save him by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ.

Now, on most Reformation Days, that's as far as the story gets, but actually, the most important part is still to come. For you know, if Luther had just discovered this truth – just heard it, learned it, accepted it intellectually – it wouldn't have changed him much at all. To really *know* God loved and forgave him, to really experience that truth in *here [heart]*, he needed to mull this truth over, needed to pray it through, needed to apply it to himself again and again, and *keep on* taking it to heart. Only as he **continued** doing that did the good news finally get through to him. Only as he **continued** doing that was he finally able to look in the mirror and see a precious child of God. And only as he **continued** doing that

did he begin to feel free – free from any need to win God’s love, free from any need to fear God’s judgment, free from any need to earn salvation; and thus, free for a life of faith, hope, and love. It was an on-going process – continually claiming, trusting, digesting the Word so that it really shaped his thinking and feeling at the deepest level.

And that was what Luther was talking about when he said, “*My conscience is captive to the Word of God.*” It wasn’t just a fleeting moment of conversion – Presto chango! Rather, it was an on-going conversion. And I do mean on-going! It wasn’t as if he reached a certain point of assurance, then could just coast. Guilt would always be waiting to prey on him if he didn’t continue to fight it with God’s Word of forgiveness. Self-doubt would always try to drag him down if he didn’t continue to fight it with God’s Word of grace. Here, too, the price of freedom was constant vigilance. To stay free, he had to continue taking the good news to heart day by day by day. Only by continuing in the Word could he really know, experience, the truth of God’s love, and that’s what kept him free inside. That’s what kept him free to live as a precious child of God!

That is the Lord’s desire for us as well...and His offer: “**If you continue in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.**” This Reformation Day, we may not be standing exactly where Luther did. We may not be standing exactly in his situation. But we do face challenges that can test us to the core – and opportunities as well! What better way to meet them than with a faith that knows the truth deep down in here [*heart*]: *God’s grace will be sufficient for me; His power will be made perfect in my weakness?* What better way to beat them than with than with a faith that knows the truth deep down in here [*heart*], “**I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me**”? So this Reformation Day, what better incentive could we have to really get into the Word and let it get into us – by continually mulling it over, continually praying it through, continually applying it and taking it to heart? Think how much good it will do us! To be able to look in the mirror and see a precious child of God! To be able face this world’s tribulations and hear Jesus whisper, “**Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world!**” To be able to stare down death itself with utter confidence in Jesus’ promise, “**Because I live, you will live also.**” That’s what it’s like when we are captive to the Word of God! That’s what we can experience deep down inside. And Jesus has shown us how: “**If you continue in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.**” Amen.

