

Luther's Stand

R. David Pogge
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Part 1

Last week we talked about the events in Martin Luther's life leading up to his posting of the 95 Theses on the Wittenberg door. Having discovered the doctrine of Salvation by Grace Through Faith in the Holy Scriptures, he was opposed to the church selling indulgences for sins past and future. He correctly understood from his study that forgiveness comes from God, not the church. Luther, either naïvely or diplomatically, suggested that the pope was unaware of how the indulgence preachers were extorting money from the people in order to build Saint Peter's Basilica. He apparently believed that the pope would prohibit the practice once the matter was brought so clearly to his attention.

It did not work out that way. Almost immediately the pope took action against Luther. Luther stood for the truth in one of the best known, and most inspiring, examples of courage in Christian history. Let us continue the story from where we left off last week with another excerpt from Chapter 7 of the Great Controversy by Ellen White.

Though Luther had been moved by the Spirit of God to begin his work, he was not to carry it forward without severe conflicts. The reproaches of his enemies, their misrepresentation of his purposes, and their unjust and malicious reflections upon his character and motives, came in upon him like an overwhelming flood.

He had felt confident that the leaders of the people, both in the church and in the schools, would gladly unite with him in efforts for reform. Already in anticipation he had seen a brighter day dawning for the church. But encouragement had changed to reproach and condemnation. Many dignitaries, of both church and state, were convicted of the truthfulness of his theses; but they soon saw that the acceptance of these truths would involve great changes. To enlighten and reform the people would be virtually to undermine the authority of Rome, to stop thousands of streams now flowing into her treasury, and thus greatly to curtail the extravagance and luxury of the papal leaders. Furthermore, to teach the people to think and act as responsible beings, looking to Christ alone for salvation, would overthrow the pontiff's throne and eventually destroy their own authority. For this reason they refused the knowledge tendered them of God and arrayed themselves against Christ and the truth by their opposition to the man whom He had sent to enlighten them.

Luther trembled as he looked upon himself--one man opposed to the mightiest powers of earth. He sometimes doubted whether he had indeed been led of God to set himself against the authority of the church. "Who was I," he writes, "to oppose the majesty of the pope, before whom ... the kings of the earth and the whole world trembled? ... No one can know what my heart suffered during these first two years, and into what despondency, I may say into what despair, I was sunk."-- D'Aubigne, b. 3, ch. 6. But he was not left to become utterly disheartened. When human support failed, he looked to God alone and learned that he could lean in perfect safety upon that all-powerful arm.

To a friend of the Reformation Luther wrote: "We cannot attain to the understanding of Scripture either by study or by the intellect. Your first duty is to begin by prayer. Entreat the Lord to grant you, of His great mercy, the true understanding of His word. There is no other interpreter of the

word of God than the Author of this word, as He Himself has said, 'They shall be all taught of God.' Hope for nothing from your own labors, from your own understanding: trust solely in God, and in the influence of His Spirit. Believe this on the word of a man who has had experience."--Ibid., b. 3, ch. 7. Here is a lesson of vital importance to those who feel that God has called them to present to others the solemn truths for this time. These truths will stir the opposition of Satan and of men who love the fables that he has devised. In the conflict with the powers of evil there is need of something more than strength of intellect and human wisdom.

When enemies appealed to custom and tradition, or to the assertions and authority of the pope, Luther met them with the Bible and the Bible only. Here were arguments which they could not answer; therefore the slaves of formalism and superstition clamored for his blood, as the Jews had clamored for the blood of Christ. "He is a heretic," cried the Roman zealots. "It is high treason against the church to allow so horrible a heretic to live one hour longer. Let the scaffold be instantly erected for him!"--Ibid., b. 3, ch. 9. But Luther did not fall a prey to their fury. God had a work for him to do, and angels of heaven were sent to protect him. Many, however, who had received from Luther the precious light were made the objects of Satan's wrath and for the truth's sake fearlessly suffered torture and death.

Luther's teachings attracted the attention of thoughtful minds throughout all Germany. From his sermons and writings issued beams of light which awakened and illuminated thousands. A living faith was taking the place of the dead formalism in which the church had so long been held. The people were daily losing confidence in the superstitions of Romanism. The barriers of prejudice were giving way. The word of God, by which Luther tested every doctrine and every claim, was like a two-edged sword, cutting its way to the hearts of the people. Everywhere there was awakening a desire for spiritual progress. Everywhere was such a hungering and thirsting after righteousness as had not been known for ages. The eyes of the people, so long directed to human rites and earthly mediators, were now turning in penitence and faith to Christ and Him crucified.

This widespread interest aroused still further the fears of the papal authorities. Luther received a summons to appear at Rome to answer to the charge of heresy. The command filled his friends with terror. They knew full well the danger that threatened him in that corrupt city, already drunk with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. They protested against his going to Rome and requested that he receive his examination in Germany.

This arrangement was finally effected, and the pope's legate was appointed to hear the case. In the instructions communicated by the pontiff to this official, it was stated that Luther had already been declared a heretic. The legate was therefore charged "to prosecute and constrain without any delay." If he should remain steadfast, and the legate should fail to gain possession of his person, he was empowered "to proscribe him in every part of Germany; to banish, curse, and excommunicate all those who are attached to him."--Ibid., b. 4, ch. 2. And, further, the pope directed his legate, in order entirely to root out the pestilent heresy, to excommunicate all, of whatever dignity in church or state, except the emperor, who should neglect to seize Luther and his adherents, and deliver them up to the vengeance of Rome.

Here is displayed the true spirit of popery. Not a trace of Christian principle, or even of common justice, is to be seen in the whole document. Luther was at a great distance from Rome; he had had no opportunity to explain or defend his position; yet before his case had been investigated, he was summarily pronounced a heretic, and in the same day, exhorted, accused, judged, and condemned; and all this by the self-styled holy father, the only supreme, infallible authority in church or state!

At this time, when Luther so much needed the sympathy and counsel of a true friend, God's providence sent Melancthon to Wittenberg. Young in years, modest and diffident in his manners, Melancthon's sound judgment, extensive knowledge, and winning eloquence, combined with the purity and uprightness of his character, won universal admiration and esteem. The brilliancy of his talents was not more marked than his gentleness of disposition. He soon became an earnest disciple of the gospel, and Luther's most trusted friend and valued supporter; his gentleness, caution, and exactness serving as a complement to Luther's courage and energy. Their union in the work added strength to the Reformation and was a source of great encouragement to Luther.

Augsburg had been fixed upon as the place of trial, and the Reformer set out on foot to perform the journey thither. Serious fears were entertained in his behalf. Threats had been made openly that he would be seized and murdered on the way, and his friends begged him not to venture. They even entreated him to leave Wittenberg for a time and find safety with those who would gladly protect him. But he would not leave the position where God had placed him. He must continue faithfully to maintain the truth, notwithstanding the storms that were beating upon him. His language was: "I am like Jeremiah, a man of strife and contention; but the more their threats increase, the more my joy is multiplied. . . . They have already destroyed my honor and my reputation. One single thing remains; it is my wretched body: let them take it; they will thus shorten my life by a few hours. But as for my soul, they cannot take that. He who desires to proclaim the word of Christ to the world, must expect death at every moment."--Ibid., b. 4, ch. 4.

The tidings of Luther's arrival at Augsburg gave great satisfaction to the papal legate. The troublesome heretic who was exciting the attention of the whole world seemed now in the power of Rome, and the legate determined that he should not escape. . . . The legate intended to force Luther, if possible, to retract, or, failing in this, to cause him to be conveyed to Rome, to share the fate of Huss and Jerome. Therefore through his agents he endeavored to induce Luther to appear without a safe-conduct, trusting himself to his mercy. This the Reformer firmly declined to do. Not until he had received the document pledging him the emperor's protection, did he appear in the presence of the papal ambassador.

As a matter of policy, the Romanists had decided to attempt to win Luther by an appearance of gentleness. The legate, in his interviews with him, professed great friendliness; but he demanded that Luther submit implicitly to the authority of the church, and yield every point without argument or question. He had not rightly estimated the character of the man with whom he had to deal. Luther, in reply, expressed his regard for the church, his desire for the truth, his readiness to answer all objections to what he had taught, and to submit his doctrines to the decision of certain leading universities. But at the same time he protested against the cardinal's course in requiring him to retract without having proved him in error.

The only response was: "Retract, retract!" The Reformer showed that his position was sustained by the Scriptures and firmly declared that he could not renounce the truth. The legate, unable to reply to Luther's arguments, overwhelmed him with a storm of reproaches, gibes, and flattery, interspersed with quotations from tradition and the sayings of the Fathers, granting the Reformer no opportunity to speak. Seeing that the conference, thus continued, would be utterly futile, Luther finally obtained a reluctant permission to present his answer in writing.

"In so doing," said he, writing to a friend, "the oppressed find double gain; first, what is written may be submitted to the judgment of others; and second, one has a better chance of working on the fears, if not on the conscience, of an arrogant and babbling despot, who would otherwise overpower by his imperious language."--Martyn, *The Life and Times of Luther*, pages 271, 272.

At the next interview, Luther presented a clear, concise, and forcible exposition of his views, fully supported by many quotations from Scripture. This paper, after reading aloud, he handed to the cardinal, who, however, cast it contemptuously aside, declaring it to be a mass of idle words and irrelevant quotations. Luther, fully aroused, now met the haughty prelate on his own ground--the traditions and teachings of the church--and utterly overthrew his assumptions.

When the prelate saw that Luther's reasoning was unanswerable, he lost all self-control, and in a rage cried out: "Retract! or I will send you to Rome, there to appear before the judges commissioned to take cognizance of your cause. I will excommunicate you and all your partisans, and all who shall at any time countenance you, and will cast them out of the church." And he finally declared, in a haughty and angry tone: "Retract, or return no more."--D'Aubigne, London ed., b. 4, ch. 8.

The Reformer promptly withdrew with his friends, thus declaring plainly that no retraction was to be expected from him. This was not what the cardinal had purposed. He had flattered himself that by violence he could awe Luther to submission. Now, left alone with his supporters, he looked from one to another in utter chagrin at the unexpected failure of his schemes.

Luther's efforts on this occasion had good results. The large assembly present had opportunity to compare the two men, and to judge for themselves of the spirit manifested by them, as well as of the strength and truthfulness of their positions. How marked the contrast! The Reformer, simple, humble, firm, stood up in the strength of God, having truth on his side; the pope's representative, self-important, overbearing, haughty, and unreasonable, was without a single argument from the Scriptures, yet vehemently crying: "Retract, or be sent to Rome for punishment."

Notwithstanding Luther had secured a safe-conduct, the Romanists were plotting to seize and imprison him. His friends urged that as it was useless for him to prolong his stay, he should return to Wittenberg without delay, and that the utmost caution should be observed in order to conceal his intentions. He accordingly left Augsburg before day-break, on horseback, accompanied only by a guide furnished him by the magistrate. With many forebodings he secretly made his way through the dark and silent streets of the city. Enemies, vigilant and cruel, were plotting his destruction. Would he escape the snares prepared for him? Those were moments of anxiety and earnest prayer. He reached a small gate in the wall of the city. It was opened for him, and with his guide he passed through without hindrance. Once safely outside, the fugitives hastened their flight, and before the legate learned of Luther's departure, he was beyond the reach of his persecutors. Satan and his emissaries were defeated. The man whom they had thought in their power was gone, escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowler.

At the news of Luther's escape the legate was overwhelmed with surprise and anger. He had expected to receive great honor for his wisdom and firmness in dealing with this disturber of the church; but his hope was disappointed. He gave expression to his wrath in a letter to [Prince] Frederick, the elector of Saxony, bitterly denouncing Luther and demanding that Frederick send the Reformer to Rome or banish him from Saxony.

In defense, Luther urged that the legate or the pope show him his errors from the Scriptures, and pledged himself in the most solemn manner to renounce his doctrines if they could be shown to contradict the word of God. And he expressed his gratitude to God that he had been counted worthy to suffer in so holy a cause.

[Prince Frederick] had, as yet, little knowledge of the reformed doctrines, but he was deeply impressed by the candor, force, and clearness of Luther's words; and until the Reformer should be proved to be in error, Frederick resolved to stand as his protector. In reply to the legate's demand he wrote: "Since Dr. Martin has appeared before you at Augsburg, you should be satisfied. We did not expect that you would endeavor to make him retract without having convinced him of his errors. None of the learned men in our principality have informed me that Martin's doctrine is impious, anti-christian, or heretical." The prince refused, moreover, to send Luther to Rome, or to expel him from his states."-- D'Aubigne, b. 4, ch. 10.

[Prince Frederick] saw that there was a general breaking down of the moral restraints of society. A great work of reform was needed. The complicated and expensive arrangements to restrain and punish crime would be unnecessary if men but acknowledged and obeyed the requirements of God and the dictates of an enlightened conscience. He saw that Luther was laboring to secure this object, and he secretly rejoiced that a better influence was making itself felt in the church.

He saw also that as a professor in the university Luther was eminently successful. Only a year had passed since the Reformer posted his theses on the castle church, yet there was already a great falling off in the number of pilgrims that visited the church at the festival of All Saints. Rome had been deprived of worshipers and offerings, but their place was filled by another class, who now came to Wittenberg, not pilgrims to adore her relics, but students to fill her halls of learning. The writings of Luther had kindled everywhere a new interest in the Holy Scriptures, and not only from all parts of Germany, but from other lands, students flocked to the university. Young men, coming in sight of Wittenberg for the first time, "raised their hands to heaven, and praised God for having caused the light of truth to shine forth from this city, as from Zion in times of old, and whence it spread even to the most distant countries."--Ibid., b. 4, ch. 10.

Luther was as yet but partially converted from the errors of Romanism. But as he compared the Holy Oracles with the papal decrees and constitutions, he was filled with wonder. "I am reading," he wrote, "the decrees of the pontiffs, and . . . I do not know whether the pope is antichrist himself, or his apostle, so greatly is Christ misrepresented and crucified in them."--Ibid., b. 5, ch. 1. Yet at this time Luther was still a supporter of the Roman Church, and had no thought that he would ever separate from her communion.

The Reformer's writings and his doctrine were extending to every nation in Christendom. The work spread to Switzerland and Holland. Copies of his writings found their way to France and Spain. In England his teachings were received as the word of life. To Belgium and Italy also the truth had extended. Thousands were awakening from their deathlike stupor to the joy and hope of a life of faith.

Rome became more and more exasperated by the attacks of Luther, and it was declared by some of his fanatical opponents, even by doctors in Catholic universities, that he who should kill the rebellious monk would be without sin. One day a stranger, with a pistol hidden under his cloak, approached the Reformer and inquired why he went thus alone. "I am in God's hands," answered Luther. "He is my strength and my shield. What can man do unto me?"--Ibid., b. 6, ch. 2. Upon hearing these words, the stranger turned pale and fled away as from the presence of the angels of heaven.

Rome was bent upon the destruction of Luther; but God was his defense. His doctrines were heard everywhere--"in cottages and convents, . . . in the castles of the nobles, in the

universities, and in the palaces of kings;" and noble men were rising on every hand to sustain his efforts.--Ibid., b. 6, ch. 2.

It was about this time that Luther, reading the works of Huss, found that the great truth of justification by faith, which he himself was seeking to uphold and teach, had been held by the Bohemian Reformer. "We have all," said Luther, "Paul, Augustine, and myself, been Hussites without knowing it!" "God will surely visit it upon the world," he continued, "that the truth was preached to it a century ago, and burned!"--Wylie, b. 6. ch. 1

In an appeal to the emperor and nobility of Germany in behalf of the reformation of Christianity, Luther wrote concerning the pope: "It is a horrible thing to behold the man who styles himself Christ's agent, displaying a magnificence that no emperor can equal. Is this being like the poor Jesus, or the humble Peter? He is, say they, the lord of the world! But Christ, whose vicar he boasts of being, has said, 'My kingdom is not of this world.' Can the dominions of a vicar extend beyond those of his superior?"-- D'Aubigne, b. 6, ch. 3.

He wrote thus of the universities: "I am much afraid that the universities will prove to be the great gates of hell, unless they diligently labor in explaining the Holy Scriptures, and engraving them in the hearts of youth. I advise no one to place his child where the Scriptures do not reign paramount. Every institution in which men are not unceasingly occupied with the word of God must become corrupt."-- Ibid., b. 6, ch. 3.

This appeal was rapidly circulated throughout Germany and exerted a powerful influence upon the people. The whole nation was stirred, and multitudes were roused to rally around the standard of reform. Luther's opponents, burning with a desire for revenge, urged the pope to take decisive measures against him. It was decreed that his doctrines should be immediately condemned. Sixty days were granted the Reformer and his adherents, after which, if they did not recant, they were all to be excommunicated.

That was a terrible crisis for the Reformation. For centuries Rome's sentence of excommunication had struck terror to powerful monarchs; it had filled mighty empires with woe and desolation. Those upon whom its condemnation fell were universally regarded with dread and horror; they were cut off from intercourse with their fellows and treated as outlaws, to be hunted to extermination. Luther was not blind to the tempest about to burst upon him; but he stood firm, trusting in Christ to be his support and shield. With a martyr's faith and courage he wrote: "What is about to happen I know not, nor do I care to know. . . . Let the blow strike where it may, I am without fear. Not so much as a leaf falls, without the will of our Father. How much rather will He care for us! It is a light thing to die for the Word, since the Word which was made flesh hath Himself died. If we die with Him, we shall live with Him; and passing through that which He has passed through before us, we shall be where He is and dwell with Him forever."-- Ibid., 3d London ed., Walther, 1840, b. 6, ch. 9.

When the papal bull reached Luther, he said: "I despise and attack it, as impious, false. . . . It is Christ Himself who is condemned therein. . . . I rejoice in having to bear such ills for the best of causes. Already I feel greater liberty in my heart; for at last I know that the pope is antichrist, and that his throne is that of Satan himself."--D'Aubigne, b. 6, ch. 9.

Yet the mandate of Rome was not without effect. Prison, torture, and sword were weapons potent to enforce obedience. The weak and superstitious trembled before the decree of the pope; and while there was general sympathy for Luther, many felt that life was too dear to be

risked in the cause of reform. Everything seemed to indicate that the Reformer's work was about to close.

But Luther was fearless still. Rome had hurled her anathemas against him, and the world looked on, nothing doubting that he would perish or be forced to yield. But with terrible power he flung back upon herself the sentence of condemnation and publicly declared his determination to abandon her forever. In the presence of a crowd of students, doctors, and citizens of all ranks Luther burned the pope's bull, with the canon laws, the decrees, and certain writings sustaining the papal power. "My enemies have been able, by burning my books," he said, "to injure the cause of truth in the minds of the common people, and destroy their souls; for this reason I consumed their books in return. A serious struggle has just begun. Hitherto I have been only playing with the pope. I began this work in God's name; it will be ended without me, and by His might." --Ibid., b. 6, ch. 10.

To the reproaches of his enemies who taunted him with the weakness of his cause, Luther answered: "Who knows if God has not chosen and called me, and if they ought not to fear that, by despising me, they despise God Himself? Moses was alone at the departure from Egypt; Elijah was alone in the reign of King Ahab; Isaiah alone in Jerusalem; Ezekiel alone in Babylon. . . . God never selected as a prophet either the high priest or any other great personage; but ordinarily He chose low and despised men, once even the shepherd Amos. In every age, the saints have had to reprove the great, kings, princes, priests, and wise men, at the peril of their lives. . . . I do not say that I am a prophet; but I say that they ought to fear precisely because I am alone and that they are many. I am sure of this, that the word of God is with me, and that it is not with them."--Ibid., b. 6, ch. 10.

Yet it was with a terrible struggle with himself that Luther decided upon a final separation from the church. It was about this time that he wrote: "I feel more and more every day how difficult it is to lay aside the scruples which one has imbibed in childhood. Oh, how much pain it has caused me, though I had the Scriptures on my side, to justify it to myself that I should dare to make a stand alone against the pope, and hold him forth as antichrist! What have the tribulations of my heart not been! How many times have I not asked myself with bitterness that question which was so frequent on the lips of the papists: 'Art thou alone wise? Can everyone else be mistaken? How will it be, if, after all, it is thyself who art wrong, and who art involving in thy error so many souls, who will then be eternally damned?' 'Twas so I fought with myself and with Satan, till Christ, by His own infallible word, fortified my heart against these doubts."--Martyn, pages 372, 373.

The pope had threatened Luther with excommunication if he did not recant, and the threat was now fulfilled. A new bull appeared, declaring the Reformer's final separation from the Roman Church, denouncing him as accursed of Heaven, and including in the same condemnation all who should receive his doctrines. The great contest had been fully entered upon.

Opposition is the lot of all whom God employs to present truths specially applicable to their time. There was a present truth in the days of Luther,--a truth at that time of special importance; there is a present truth for the church today.

But truth is no more desired by the majority today than it was by the papists who opposed Luther. There is the same disposition to accept the theories and traditions of men instead of the word of God as in former ages. Those who present the truth for this time should not expect to be received with greater favor than were earlier reformers. The great controversy between truth

and error, between Christ and Satan, is to increase in intensity to the close of this world's history.

Said Jesus to His disciples: "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his Lord. If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept My saying, they will keep yours also." John 15:19, 20. And on the other hand our Lord declared plainly: "Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets." Luke 6:26. The spirit of the world is no more in harmony with the spirit of Christ today than in earlier times, and those who preach the word of God in its purity will be received with no greater favor now than then. The forms of opposition to the truth may change, the enmity may be less open because it is more subtle; but the same antagonism still exists and will be manifested to the end of time.¹

There is an important lesson for us, living at the end of time. We will talk about it right after listening to Martin Luther's greatest hit, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

[music]

Part 2

What is the lesson we can learn from Martin Luther's experience? Let's try to learn it by imagining we are watching the Family Feud TV show. Suppose the MC says,

"We surveyed 100 people: the top two answers are on the board. Name someone who really understood the doctrine of righteousness by faith."

The two correct answers are the apostle Paul and Martin Luther. It was Paul who wrote, and Luther who preached,

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, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8)

Now, let's continue listening to our imaginary episode of Family Feud.

"We surveyed 100 people: the top two answers are on the board. Name someone who spent the rest of his life working for God after his conversion."

Again, the two correct answers are Paul and Luther.

In the first segment of our broadcast we told you just some of the persecution Luther suffered for opposing the sale of indulgences and preaching righteousness by faith. Paul made a similar sacrifice. In his own words,

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country,

¹ E.G. White, The Great Controversy, Chapter 7, "Luther's Separation From Rome", <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/gc/gc7.html>

in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Cor 11:24-27)

If you work as hard for Jesus as Paul and Luther did, you might be accused of trying to work your way into heaven. You might be called a “legalist.” You might be accused of not believing in the grace of God. But Paul and Luther believed in grace, certainly weren’t legalists, and knew they could not work their way into heaven. So, why did they work so hard for God?

Let’s turn to television again for the answer. Even if you have never watched the Oprah Winfrey show, you probably heard about the day Oprah gave everyone in her studio a brand new car. The people in the audience did nothing to earn the car. The gift was the result of Oprah’s generosity (and promotional consideration). The car was an absolutely free gift. But, as the audience members soon discovered, the cost of receiving the free gift was considerable.

Let’s suppose the sticker price of the car was about \$21,000. The Internal Revenue Service considers that to be income. If a member of the audience was in the 30% marginal tax bracket, that would increase his income tax bill by about \$7,000. Our hypothetical audience member might have lived in a state with income tax, so he might owe another \$3,000 in state income tax. He would also have to pay vehicle registration, annual license fee, and auto insurance. The free car might cost an audience member as much as \$15,000 in fees and taxes. Some audience members might have refused the car because they could not afford to receive it!

Salvation is a free gift, but the cost of receiving it is high. Jesus told two parables, recorded in Matthew 13, about the value of the free gift, and the sacrifice that should be made to obtain it.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. (Mt. 13:44-46)

Jesus taught that although salvation is free, it will cost everything you have. That’s why some people refuse it. They don’t realize that it is worth the cost.

You have probably heard the story of the rich young ruler, but just in case you have not, it is found in Mark 10, verses 17-29.

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”

“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”

The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”

Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

Peter said to him, “We have left everything to follow you!”

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

If the Gospel were nothing more than, “God loves you and requires no commitment” then everyone would accept it. But there is much more to the Gospel, and some people reject the free gift of salvation when they discover how much it costs to receive it. Consider these verses from the Gospel of John, Chapter 6.

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” ...

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

“You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve.

Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:6, 66-69)

It costs a lot to become a Christian: but the rewards greatly outweigh the cost.

There is a counterfeit Christianity, based on cheap grace, which costs nothing; but it is worth no more than you pay for it. Counterfeit Christianity teaches that you can just say you believe and get baptized, and be saved; but real Christianity requires commitment. That’s why Jesus said,

“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62)

Are you looking ahead, plowing a straight furrow for God? Or have you looked back fondly at your old life and decided you don’t really want to give it up. If you are truly converted, you should be supporting your church with your tithes, time and talent. And, if finances permit, you might contribute to your favorite self-supporting radio ministry, too. But most importantly, you should be supporting your church through prayer and Bible study, to make sure your church is plowing a straight furrow.

Because Luther was so grateful for the gift of salvation, he was willing to pay the price of leading the reformation. He put his hand to the plow, and did not look back.

In the previous section, Martin Luther was quoted as saying,

I do not know whether the pope is antichrist himself, or his apostle, so greatly is Christ misrepresented and crucified in them.

And later,

[A]t last I know that the pope is antichrist, and that his throne is that of Satan himself.

Luther was not name-calling. He had read the first and second letters of John, in which the antichrist is described. He recognized that John's description fit the pope perfectly. He knew exactly who it was who was opposing the reformation. Furthermore, he knew he was vastly outnumbered. That's why he said,

"Moses was alone at the departure from Egypt; Elijah was alone in the reign of King Ahab; Isaiah alone in Jerusalem; Ezekiel alone in Babylon. ... I do not say that I am a prophet; but I say that they ought to fear precisely because I am alone and that they are many. I am sure of this, that the word of God is with me, and that it is not with them."

Luther knew he was right even though he was in the minority; but still he had doubts. Remember, he said,

Oh, how much pain it has caused me, though I had the Scriptures on my side, to justify it to myself that I should dare to make a stand alone against the pope, and hold him forth as antichrist! What have the tribulations of my heart not been! How many times have I not asked myself with bitterness that question which was so frequent on the lips of the papists: 'Art thou alone wise? Can everyone else be mistaken?'

Luther stood for the truth despite tremendous opposition from an established church that had mixed many pagan beliefs and customs with Biblical truths.

In these last days, some churches which call themselves Christian will have compromised so much with the secular world that Jesus will not recognize them. The Bible tells us that, just before the second coming, there will be a difficult period during which people will have to choose between true Christianity and compromised Christianity. Most people will choose to compromise. Be prepared to stand for Jesus, in the minority, and at great personal cost. Be the person in your church that God can depend upon to stand up for Biblical truth even when others try to pull your church away from God.

Salvation is a free gift; but the cost of ownership is high. Like the pearl of great price, it will cost all you have to keep it; but everything you have is a small price to pay for something as valuable as eternal life.