

Series: *Remembering the Reformation*

Title: "Persecution: Impossible in a 'Christian' Nation?" (Psalm 31)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 11/30/2019

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Today we conclude the sermon we began on our last broadcast.

This transcript includes the entire message.

This evening I want to begin by doing something I don't usually do. Usually when I preach before a congregation or on our radio broadcast, I first direct our attention to the Word of God.

But this evening I would like to take a few moments to introduce the passage that is before us in a particular way., On October 31 1517, the great reformer Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg in Germany. Why did Luther do this? He did it because, as he studied the Scriptures for himself, he had a growing certainty that the church and the Pope were wrong. He had a growing certainty that a man is made right with God by being justified by grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ alone as full and final atonement for sin.

This essential understanding came into the heart of Martin Luther by a great work of the spirit of God. And it caused him to realize that everything that the Catholic church was saying and doing must be called into question.

- The entire system of the baptism of an infant so that that infant might have, as the church said, his original sin cleansed.
- The system of confessions to a priest and penances prescribed by a

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priest in order to be forgiven of sins subsequently committed.

- The abuse of the sale of indulgences by the church to raise money for its various works and to enrich men who held positions of authority within the church, indulgences by which it was claimed that the Pope had the power to forgive sins.

The problem became so severe, that Pope Leo the 10th in Luther's time was authorizing the sale of indulgences in Germany that claimed to absolve the person who purchase this indulgence from all sin, past present and future.

And, the church claimed that you could purchase this same indulgence to free a loved one, who the church claimed was in the fires of purgatory.

A Growing Protest

Luther's questioning of these things soon became a growing protest of these things. His 95 theses were taken down from the church door at Wittenberg and copied and printed and distributed widely among the peoples of Europe in their native languages.

And so the people themselves, and growing numbers of the priests of the church, began to question the very foundation upon which the Roman Catholic Church had been built, which was that man is not justified by faith alone, but is saved by his baptism and by his works, and that the church, not God Himself, dispenses this salvation as it sees fit.

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Luther wrote many other books during this period which called into question many things within the church. Many of his books also called the attention of the people once again to the truths of the Christian faith, not only that justification is by faith alone in Christ alone, but also that God expects those who believe in Christ to demonstrate the outworking of that faith by a sanctified life through the renewing work of the Holy Spirit.

All of this brought Luther into growing conflict with the authorities of the church, and with the Pope himself. One of the Pope's great concerns was that suddenly the sale of indulgences in Germany, which the Pope was using to fund the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the largest church in the world, that income fell off dramatically when Luther's preaching and writing began to spread.

Some of Luther's friends warned him that what he was doing would place his very life in danger. They reminded him of what had happened to John Hus, who had raised some of the same questions a century earlier in the area of Europe that is now known as the Czech Republic. Hus was burned at the stake.

Luther's friends feared that the same would happen to him. And indeed, those in authority in Rome did want Luther to suffer a similar death.

Luther at Worms

And so, three and a half years after Luther nailed those 95 theses to the church

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door, he was summoned by the Emperor Charles V, who was acting on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church, to appear before the Emperor, and the nobles of the Empire, and the Cardinals of the church, at a Council in the city of Worms in Germany.

The intention of this Council and of the men who convened it was to expose Luther as a heretic, and to condemn him to death.

Now it is worth noting why the Emperor and the leaders of the church intended to do this. They said this: We must unite in opposition to the Muslims. The Muslims are preparing to storm the gates of Vienna. We must unite in a crusade against Islam. And therefore any theological differences within the visible church must be suppressed. The promoters of those theological differences must be crushed. We must do these things for the greater good.

Doesn't that sound like what we here in our own time? We are told that religious conservatives (and I put that in quotes) must all unite against Islam. We must all unite against abortion. We must all unite on this crusade or that crusade. And in order to do that, we must put the claims of authentic Biblical Christianity aside. The parallels with the situation 500 years ago are striking.

And so Luther went to appear before this Council. He knew, at this point, that he was indeed going to be on trial for his life. And so, we understand from the historical record, that as he prepared to come before this great Council and before the Emperor, Psalm 31 was very much on his heart.

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And so with this in mind, let us read this Psalm. Let us read this, thinking of what Martin Luther faced. Think of the trap that had been set for him. Think of the growing opposition that he faced. Think also of the fact that Martin Luther trusted in his God as a mighty Fortress.

With these things in mind, let us read Psalm 31:

1.) In Thee, O Lord, do I put my trust; let me never be ashamed: deliver me in Thy righteousness.

2.) Bow down Thine ear to me; deliver me speedily: be Thou my strong rock, for an house of defence to save me.

3.) For Thou art my rock and my fortress; therefore for Thy name's sake lead me, and guide me.

4.) Pull me out of the net that they have laid privily for me: for Thou art my strength.

5.) Into Thine hand I commit my spirit: Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth.

6.) I have hated them that regard lying vanities: but I trust in the Lord.

7.) I will be glad and rejoice in Thy mercy: for Thou hast considered my trouble; Thou hast known my soul in adversities;

8.) And hast not shut me up into the hand of the enemy: Thou hast set

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my feet in a large room.

9.) Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am in trouble: mine eye is consumed with grief, yea, my soul and my belly.

10.) For my life is spent with grief, and my years with sighing: my strength faileth because of mine iniquity, and my bones are consumed.

11.) I was a reproach among all mine enemies, but especially among my neighbours, and a fear to mine acquaintance: they that did see me without fled from me.

12.) I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind: I am like a broken vessel.

13.) For I have heard the slander of many: fear was on every side: while they took counsel together against me, they devised to take away my life.

14.) But I trusted in Thee, O Lord: I said, Thou art my God.

15.) My times are in Thy hand: deliver me from the hand of mine enemies, and from them that persecute me.

16.) Make Thy face to shine upon Thy servant: save me for Thy mercies' sake.

17.) Let me not be ashamed, O Lord; for I have called upon Thee: let

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the wicked be ashamed, and let them be silent in the grave.

18.) Let the lying lips be put to silence; which speak grievous things proudly and contemptuously against the righteous.

19.) Oh how great is Thy goodness, which Thou hast laid up for them that fear Thee; which Thou hast wrought for them that trust in Thee before the sons of men!

20.) Thou shalt hide them in the secret of Thy presence from the pride of man: Thou shalt keep them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of tongues.

21.) Blessed be the Lord: for He hath shewed me his marvellous kindness in a strong city.

22.) For I said in my haste, I am cut off from before Thine eyes: nevertheless Thou heardest the voice of my supplications when I cried unto Thee.

23.) O love the Lord, all ye his saints: for the Lord preserveth the faithful, and plentifully rewardeth the proud doer.

24.) Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord.

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"I Am Bound By the Text of Scripture"

We understand from the historical record that Luther may well have read this Psalm, and indeed prayed this Psalm, on the evening before he appeared before the Emperor and the officials of the church. We also know that Psalm 46 was very much on his heart during these days.

And it was from these two Psalms that Luther would compose the words of the great hymn that we sang this past Sunday morning, A Mighty Fortress Is Our God. He did not write the hymn until a few years later,. Bt clearly, the burning thought of refuge in God as his fortress was already much on Luther's mind.

And so, on April 20th, 1521, Luther appeared before this council. Luther was confronted with copies of his various writings. He was asked if they were his. And he said, of course, that they were. And then he was asked: "Will you retract these writings and the beliefs they contain? Will you, or will you not, recant.?"

Luther answered by saying this:

I am asked to retract these writings. But they are of different kinds. In some, I discuss faith and good works. If I were to retract these writings I should be denying accepted Christian truths.

In others, I attack popery, and assail men who have ruined the Christian world, and have afflicted the bodies and souls of other men. If I were to retract those, I should be like a cloak that covers evil...

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Unless you can convince me [that I am wrong] by Scripture, and not by popes or councils who have often contradicted each other... I am bound to my beliefs by the text of the Bible. My conscience is captive to the Word of God.... Therefore, I cannot and I will not recant.

Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.

The Emperor's Sentence, God's Protection

Because Luther had been guaranteed safe conduct to travel to this council by the Emperor, the Emperor was not convinced that he could act against Luther. But the representatives of the Pope convinced Charles V that he must act on their behalf. And so, in May 20th, 1521, a month later, Charles V issued this edict concerning Martin Luther:

Twenty-one days we give him [to recant his beliefs]. After that, his books shall be wiped from the memory of man. His followers, whoever they may be, shall be condemned. And this Luther himself, he shall be under our curse. No man shall harbor him, no man protect him. I declare him here by an outlaw, free to be hunted, free to be seized by anyone, anywhere, and to be put to death at will.

By the providential mercies of God, Prince Frederick III of Saxony, who was known as Frederick the Wise, who was an uncle of the Emperor and a defender of Luther, had Luther spirited away to a place of protection within his realm, a castle

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fortress called the Wartburg, and thus Luther was protected from the sentence of the Emperor.

Luther lived for another 25 years under the protection of Frederick the third and his successor. Luther translated the Scriptures into German. Luther taught openly what we have come to know as the doctrines of grace. And he died at the age of 62, having been used of God to kindle a fire of Reformation that resulted in the salvation and edification of a faithful remnant of believers throughout Europe.

Impossible In a "Christian" Nation?

Dear friends, Martin Luther did not think that he would come to a point where he would be on trial for his life for the Christian faith in so-called Christian Europe. He was, at first, shocked by the intense persecution and opposition that he began to experience, in so-called Christian Europe.

In the earlier messages in our time together, we have looked at the darkening state of the visible evangelical church throughout the world today.

We live in a time of postmodernist thinking. Postmodernist thinking has made great inroads in the church. In this way of thinking, there is no singular standard of truth. All views must be tolerated.

I was speaking last evening after the service with a lady who said that her son attends a church which is considered to be a conservative evangelical church. But the pastor of that church says that the time is past when the church should speak

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against abortion. The time is past when the church should speak against so-called homosexual marriage.

The reason for this, he says, is that these things are now the law of the land, and so those fights are over. Dear friends, those fights are never over. But this nominally conservative evangelical pastor echoes the stated thinking of Pope Francis the First, who says that the church has no right to judge homosexuals, or to interfere in their lives. The Pope says that the church must find, as he puts it, a "new balance" between its spiritual and political missions. I don't find in the Word of God that the church has a political mission.

That is just one example of what is happening, and how self-described evangelicals are embracing the positions of Rome. All in the name of tolerance.

Dear friends, we are rapidly approaching a situation in which the only thing that will be intolerable within the visible church is authentic biblical Christianity. The facts that we faced as we looked at the situation last evening tell us that the foundations are being laid for this.

In the eyes of increasing numbers within the church itself, Bible believing Christians are becoming intolerable people. If we continue to speak the truth, as we must, I believe that we are entering a time in which we ourselves, or a generation soon to come, will face open persecution even in so-called Christian America, just as Luther and Calvin and the others faced persecution in so-called Christian Europe 500 years ago.

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How Will We Respond?

The question is, How will we respond? How will our children and grandchildren respond? May we, and they, respond with the same heart that David expressed to the Lord in Psalm 31, the same words that Martin Luther found so precious as he faced opposition, persecution, and even the prospect of death for the faith.

In my own lifetime I have only known two people who died for their faith in Christ. One was a missionary in Colombia in South America. He was captured and put to death by a group of terrorists who embrace Roman Catholic liberation theology. Liberation theology is a mingling of Roman Catholicism and Marxism.

The other individual who I knew who died for the faith was a lady in the church in which I grew up. She had gloriously come to saving faith in Jesus Christ through the ministry of our church.

But her husband embraced the Eastern form of Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy. He hated the Gospel. He hated what our church stood for. He hated the fact that his wife was attending our church. When our pastor approached him about the Gospel and his own need of salvation, this lady's husband scoffed in the worst possible terms.

His hatred of the things of God, and his hatred of the new life in Christ that he saw in his wife, were so great, that one Saturday evening he killed her and then

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killed himself.

We hear of violent opposition to the Gospel and the martyrdom of saints in other parts of the world. Let us not think that it is impossible here. Government and the judicial system in this country have taken on a very anti-Christian complexion.

Growing numbers within the visible church, in the name of a distorted view of the idea of separation of church and state, are in fact supporting government's efforts to suppress authentic biblical Christianity.

I don't know what will happen dear friends. We may have peace. But I believe that we are, in fact, seeing the gathering dark clouds of persecution even in our own nation.

But whatever happens, we must remain true to our God. We must, with the psalmist, with Luther, say

In Thee, O Lord, do I put my trust; let me never be ashamed: deliver me in my righteousness. Bow down my ear to me; deliver me speedily: be Thou my strong rock, for an house of defense to save me. For Thou art my rock and my fortress; therefore for Thy name's sake lead me, and guide me.

Those who would oppose us will, under the influence of the evil one, set traps for us, set traps for the true believing church. Let us pray therefore pray the words

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that we find in Psalm 31 beginning at verse four: "Pull me out of the net that they have laid privily for me: for Thou art my strength."

Our lives, as we read in verse 10, may be consumed with grief, as we see departure and declension from the faith all around us. We may, as David writes in verse 22, have times when we think that we have been cut off from before the eyes of the Lord.

Because others who we may have once thought were in the faith, forsake the faith, and forsake us, we may be inclined to think that God has forsaken us. But he has not, and he will not. He says to us, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee."

We may become, as David says in verse 11, "a reproach among all our enemies, but especially among our neighbors [those closest to us], and a fear to our acquaintances [in other words, as we take a stand, many who were once willing to be associated with us may fear even to be seen with us or identified with us].

We may, as we read in verse 13, "hear the slander of many... While they take counsel against" us.

Dear friends, whatever may come, whatever griefs and disappointments we may have, as we see the deteriorating condition of much of the church around us, whatever griefs and disappointments we may have, even as some of our own friends and family seem to be departing from the faith, in a time when the church so much needs Reformation once again -- whatever may happen, we can say with

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the psalmist, verse five,

Into Thine hand I commit my spirit: Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord
God of truth."

We can say, we must say, with David, verse 14,

I trusted in the, O Lord: I said, Thou art my God. My times are in my
hand: deliver me from the hand of mine enemies, and from them that
persecute me. Make Thy face to shine upon Thy servant: save me for
Thy mercy's sake.

Let me not be ashamed, O Lord, for I have called upon the: let the
wicked be ashamed, and let them be silent in the grave.

We may call upon our Lord to silence and to bring to naught the influences of
those who are causing those we hold dear, to stray from the truth, and even
forsake the truth.

Our God is able to bring deliverance. We must rely on him. We must rely on his
strong right arm and not on the arm of flesh. We must come before the throne of
grace continually to ask and to plead for the spiritual protection of those who have
been brought to the light, and for the regeneration of those who need to come to
the light.

We can say with the psalmist, verse 18, "Let the lying lips be put to silence;
which the grievous things probably and contemptuously against the righteous."

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We can call upon our God and ask these things of him.

We can say, with the psalmist, and we can rejoice, as Luther did, in the words of verse 19 and following:

Oh how great is Thy goodness which Thou hast laid out for them that fear the; which Thou hast wrought for them that trust in the before the sons of men!

Thou shalt hide them in the secretive by presence from the pride of man: Thou shalt keep them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of tongues.

Blessed be the Lord: for he had showed me his marvelous kindness in a strong city [that is, within a fortified city].

Dear friends, God has called us to take refuge in Him. He himself is our fortress. He himself is our fortified city. In Psalm 91, we read this:

He that dwell within the secret place of the most high shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, he is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.

Ephesians chapter 6 tells us that he has provided not only himself as a fortress but also the armor of protection against the onslaughts of the enemy. We read in Ephesians chapter 6 that we "wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the spiritual darkness of this

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world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

And therefore, God has provided us an armor. But we must take it up. If we take it up, we will "be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."

That armor, we are told, includes the Gospel itself. We must never forsake it. We must always, as it were, wear the Gospel as part of our armor. Truth, righteousness, faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sort of the spirit, which is the Word of God.

Last Saturday morning at the men's retreat I was pointing out to the men that in Colossians chapter 2, the apostle Paul speaks of this great conflict in which we are involved. He said to the Colossians, "I have this great spiritual conflict for you." What he was saying, literally in the original language, is that I wear this conflict like a garment. It is always with me.

And so it must always be with us. God has given each of us those for whom we are spiritually responsible. We must stand strong in the faith, no matter what happens, no matter what opposition, no matter what persecution, no matter what the source, inside the visible church or outside. We must remain within our mighty Fortress, the protection of our God, for the sake of those God has placed in our care. We must take upon ourselves the whole armor of God, that we may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. To stand firmly, because of Christ's finished work.

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This must be our position. God will honor it. God will provide every resource to accomplish his glorious purposes in and through us as we submit to him.

As we've noted more than once during this series of messages, we find as we look at history in Scripture, and in the 2,000 years of the church since Pentecost, that God does mighty work through seemingly insignificant remnants. Faithful remnants.

And so, as we conclude our services together tomorrow evening, the Lord willing, I would like to call our attention to that great fact from the Word of God. And I trust that these things will be profitable to us, spiritually profitable, that we might ever more faithfully serve him.

About the Broadcast

The Scripture-Driven Church airs each week across the United States and around the world. Our goal is to obey Christ's Great Commission: preaching the Gospel to all, and equipping believers in Christ to live every area of life by the sole authority of Scripture, to the glory of our Lord and Savior.

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of His inspired, infallible, inerrant Word.**

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