

**In the name of Jesus, who has set us free from sin and made us righteous through faith in Him. Amen.**

Have you ever wondered whether you've done enough to please God? Have you been faithful enough? Prayed enough? Helped enough people? Have you lived the kind of life God expects of you?

Nearly 500 years ago, a young German monk named Martin Luther was asking those same questions. Only for Luther, they had become almost unbearable. Luther desperately wanted to please God. He prayed for hours, fasted, confessed his sins, and devoted himself to religious discipline. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find peace.

He knew God was righteous and holy. He also knew he was a sinner. And the harder he tried to make himself acceptable to God, the more aware he became of his failures. Imagine spending your life trying to earn God's approval, never knowing whether you've done enough. That was Luther's struggle.

But as he studied the Scriptures, particularly Paul's letter to the Romans, Luther began to understand something that would transform his life and much of the Christian Church. **The righteousness God requires isn't something we can earn. It's something God gives us through faith in Jesus Christ.** Paul writes, **"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."** **(Romans 3:20)**

Those words are pretty straightforward. No one can earn salvation by being good enough. Not Luther. Not you. Not me. The Law reveals our sin. It shows us God's perfect standard and how far we fall short. Paul writes, **"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** **(Romans 3:23)**

All means all.

But then Paul gives us two of the most beautiful words in Scripture. **"But now."** **"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law."** **(Romans 3:21)**

There's the turning point. God has done something for us that we could never accomplish ourselves. Through Jesus Christ, God has provided the righteousness we lack.

Paul continues, **"and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."** **(Romans 3:24)** A gift! Not a reward for being a good person. Not something earned through years of church attendance, generosity, or good behavior. A gift, purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ. And that was the wonderful truth Luther came to understand.

In 1517, Luther challenged the practice of selling indulgences, which encouraged people to believe that financial payments could reduce punishment for sin. His **Ninety-Five Theses** helped ignite what became the Protestant Reformation.

But Luther's greatest contribution wasn't simply challenging abuses within the Church. It was directing Christians back to Scripture and the saving work of Jesus Christ.

And his influence extended well beyond the Church. Luther translated the Bible into German so ordinary people could read God's Word for themselves. His translation helped shape a common written German language, bringing people from different regions closer together.

He encouraged communities to establish schools and believed children, including girls, should receive an education. His Small Catechism helped parents teach their children the Christian faith.

And he encouraged congregational singing, writing hymns like *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, which we're singing today.

Bible translation, education, music, and even the development of a common language. Luther's work influenced generations of people.

**But none of those accomplishments could save Luther. Only Jesus could do that.** And the same is true for us. We can raise families, serve our communities, support our church, and care for people in need. Those are good things, and God calls us to do them. But they don't earn us a place in heaven.

That's why Jesus' words in today's Gospel are so important. **"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:36)** Jesus was speaking to people who believed they were already free. They were descendants of Abraham. They had their religious heritage and traditions.

But Jesus told them that everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. And that's a kind of slavery no human effort can overcome. We value our independence. We like believing we're in control of our lives. But sin has a way of reminding us otherwise.

We know we should forgive, but sometimes we hold on to resentment. We know we should trust God, but worry keeps us awake at night. We know we should love our neighbors, but sometimes we struggle even to be patient with them. Despite our best intentions, we continue to fall short.

But Jesus didn't come into this world simply to tell us to try harder. **He came to rescue us.** He lived the perfect life we could never live. He carried our sins to the cross. He suffered the punishment we deserved. And through His resurrection, He defeated sin, death, and the devil.

That's what it means to be free indeed. It doesn't mean we'll never struggle with sin again. It means sin no longer has the final word over us.

Our guilt doesn't define us. Our failures don't determine our eternity. And our salvation doesn't depend upon how well we've performed. It depends entirely upon Jesus Christ. And He has never failed.

That's the Gospel Luther rediscovered in Scripture. And it's the Gospel the Church continues to proclaim today.

The Reformation wasn't about creating a Church that worshiped Martin Luther. It was about restoring the clear proclamation of Jesus Christ and His saving grace.

That's why we continue to teach our children the Catechism, study God's Word, confess our sins, receive His forgiveness, and gather around His Table.

Because we need the same Gospel Luther needed. We need to hear that our sins are forgiven, that God's love isn't something we have to earn, and that because Jesus lives, we too shall live.

And when life becomes difficult, when our health fails, when we lose someone we love, or when we wonder what the future holds, we have something far greater than our own strength to depend upon.

We have the promises of Jesus Christ.

Luther understood that when he wrote *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.

Our fortress isn't our accomplishments, our financial security, our health, or even our church membership.

**Our fortress is God Himself. And His promises do not fail.**

So today, as we celebrate the Reformation, we give thanks for Martin Luther and the faithful Christians who helped restore the clear teaching of God's Word.

But even more, we give thanks for Jesus Christ, who accomplished what none of us could ever accomplish for ourselves.

**We are sinners, justified by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, apart from works of the Law.**

And because the Son has set us free, we are free indeed.

**Amen.**