

Sermon Series – Reformation 500 Themes

Anfechtung - Tribulation

Text: Philippians 4:4-13

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹²I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Theme: Peace in the Midst of Affliction

Of all of the Reformation concepts that we have looked at in the last two months, this one might be the most helpful. It is what Luther said about *Anfechtung*, which could be translated as affliction or tribulation. It is best described as the crosses that we bear in life. In fact, Luther would contrast the theology of the cross with a theology of glory. The reason why Luther's thoughts are so helpful is because it is only when we are ready for the crosses that we can find peace in the midst of affliction.

I. What is *Anfechtung*?

These are the things that we go through in life that make us wonder whether God is in control. They might even make us question God's goodness. They are attacks of the devil. While God thwarts most of the attacks of the devil against us, there are times when He allows crosses to come into our lives. Some of them come through the world. There is sickness, weakness, disaster, and war. Others come through ourselves. There are times when we oppose God and His will. We languish in self-pity. We are anxious or impatient when things don't go our way. There are many examples of this in the Bible: Abraham waited 25 years for God's promise of a son to be fulfilled. David was often pursued by King Saul. Job lost all of his children and his wealth. He was covered in sores from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. In our text St. Paul was in prison. This was after he went through all kinds of suffering as he shared the Gospel. The faith was not easy for any of these people. In fact, at the end of his first missionary journey, Paul returned to all of the

congregations and reminded them that we go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. (Ac 14:22) Of course the biggest example was Jesus. He was born in a stable and His parents were forced to flee from King Herod. He was betrayed by one of His disciples and denied by another. In the end, He was rejected by His own people and nailed to a cross. From that cross He cried out, *“My God, my God why have you forsaken Me?!”*

Martin Luther also had his share of *Anfechtung*. Early in life he struggled to be accepted by God. When he realized that God had accepted him by grace through faith in Christ, many people rejected that message. Again and again he was told to recant his teaching. He was excommunicated, and condemned as an outlaw. He contended with people who took the Reformation in unscriptural directions and used it to promote their own agendas. He even wrestled with himself. He often wondered how he could be so sure of himself and whether he was really right. He saw that all of his trials and afflictions were attacks of the devil. He writes about this in his hymn “A Mighty Fortress.” It states, **“Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us.”** In fact, at the end of the first verse of that hymn, the devil is winning. In his morning and evening prayers he writes, **“Let your holy angel be with me that he evil foe may have no power over me.”** He understood that the devil is like a roaring lion who is seeking whom he might devour.

II. There are also some warnings with regard to *Anfechtung*.

The most important is that it is not a punishment. Many times when people are going through hard times, they think that God is punishing them. They wonder what they did to deserve this. But the Scriptures show that God does not discipline us because He is angry with us, but because He loves us. It is like when the grapevines or fruit trees are pruned. He allows us to go through such times so that they will strengthen our faith and our love for each other in the end. They are never a punishment of God for the Christian. They are discipline, so that we bear more fruit.

We also shouldn't seek crosses. When God gives us times of reprieve, thank Him for those times of rest. Enjoy the blessings and the peace that God is giving you at those times. Don't feel guilty when things are going well for you. God blesses us in those times. Our lives have enough trouble. God doesn't want us to search for more of it.

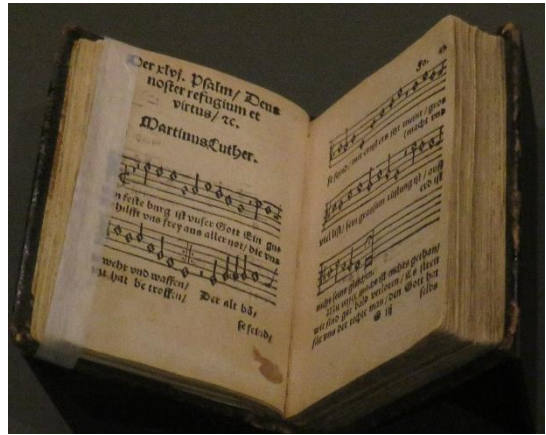
Don't think that something strange is happening when you have afflictions. There are people who think that Christians should go through life healthy and wealthy. We shouldn't have any troubles or fears. This is what Luther called “The theology of glory.” Today we call it the “Prosperity Gospel.” I have a lot of channels on my Satellite tv that preach this. It teaches that Christians should never have any difficulties in life. If you really believe and pay a tithe to the tv preacher, your life will be trouble-free. But think of the heroes of the faith that I mentioned before. They all went through times of trials and affliction. They had to be patient and enduring. If we think that life will be a bed of roses for the Christian in this life, we will soon fall from faith when the devil comes with attacks that are meant to question God's goodness and His love for us.

II. In the end, God gives us the victory in every time of trial.

That is where our text comes into play. Paul writes, *“I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* (Phil 4:13)

He writes, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” When we look to Christ and call to Him in prayer, He gives us the strength that we need. He fills our hearts with the peace that passes all understanding. We know that He is with us, and that there is nothing that can separate us from His love. Even in the most difficult days of our lives we fear no evil, for Christ is with us. He will never leave us or forsake us. He loved us so much that He gave His life for the forgiveness of our sins on the cross. His power is so great that He conquered death and rose on the 3rd day. Through faith in Him all of our sins are forgiven, God is now for us, and if God is for us, who can be against us. As Christians we can go through life confident of God’s love in Christ in any situation.

Luther also taught us that confidence. I said that after the first verse of “A Mighty Fortress” the devil is winning, but in verse 2 he writes, “**But for us fight the Valiant One, whom God Himself elected... Ask ye who is this? Jesus Christ it is!...He holds the field forever.**” He also teaches us to begin the day and end the day in peace as we pray, “**Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me.**” Every one of us can live in that confidence every day of our lives. This world is full of trouble, especially for the Christian, but take heart God’s love and power for us in Christ is even greater. That is why our hearts are filled with the peace of God, even in the midst of affliction.



Amen.

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