

# SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

## Reformation Sunday

October 31, 2021

### Psalm 46:1–11 (ESV):

1 God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.

2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,  
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,  
3 though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah

4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High.

5 God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;  
God will help her when morning dawns.

6 The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;  
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

7 The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

8 Come, behold the works of the LORD,  
how he has brought desolations on the earth.

9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;  
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;  
he burns the chariots with fire.

10 "Be still, and know that I am God.  
I will be exalted among the nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth!"

11 The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

**First Reading: Revelation 14:6–7 (ESV):**

**The Messages of the Three Angels**

6 Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. 7 And he said with a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

**EPISTLE: Romans 3:19–28 (ESV):**

19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

**The Righteousness of God Through Faith**

21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. 27 Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28 For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

**THE GOSPEL - John 8:31–36 (ESV); Matthew 11:12–19 (ESV):**

**The Truth Will Set You Free**

31 So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” 33 They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”

**34** Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. **35** The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. **36** So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

**Matthew 11:12–19 (ESV):**

**12** From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. **13** For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, **14** and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.

**15** He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

**16** “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,

**17** “ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’

**18** For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ **19** The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

**Sermon 44 – Reformation Sunday**

**“Basics”**

**Romans 3:19-28**

**Dear Friends:**

Reformation Sunday is celebration of the insights Luther gained from the New Testament, and it is this particular chapter and verse that brought Luther to do what he did. Romans has it all, a laying out of the Christian faith in step-by-step fashion, so its no surprise that Luther found what he did in Romans. This particular passage highlights especially the interplay between Law and Gospel. God has always had a message of condemnation for sinful humans, and He has always had a promise of redemption for those same humans. These two things seem contradictory but they're not, they're essential messages that carry us where God wants us to go. Where is that? Heaven. God

wants His people to be saved, to come to the knowledge of the truth, and this is how God has chosen to that. The truth of this message rings just as much to us as it does to Luther, so let's get into it.

As I said, this is Romans, and it is early Romans, so we're dealing with basics here. Paul has in previous chapters talked about the full extent of sin, what it really means to say that all human beings have sin. Put simply, it means we are doomed straight from conception, that when human life begins, there is sin. When human life ends, there is sin. With everything in between conception and death, there is sin. We cannot escape this, we cannot choose otherwise, we cannot be anything other than sinner no matter how hard we try. Paul outlines this as clearly and precisely as he can in the first chapters of Romans. Sin is everywhere. It is in the world because of us. It is in our families because of us. It is in our work because of us. Most important of all, it is in our hearts, the one place we cannot reach or change.

After that rather downbeat assessment, Paul begins to shift his focus. Why does Paul tell us this? Why does God want us to know this? Because every solution begins with a problem. You cannot have a Savior without having something to be saved *from*. **“19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”** Part of talking about sin is talking about all the ways which we cannot help this problem, we cannot deal with it. There's lots of them out there, there were in his time, and there are in our time as well. The one Paul deals with most in Romans is also one of the most common delusions that human beings operate under. That if we work hard enough, if we believe hard enough, if we just try and do the right things, we can somehow become free of sin on our own. Paul shuts this down hard. He says that wherever the Law speaks, it has to be obeyed. So where does the Law speak? Everywhere. God's Law, the Ten Commandments, there's no way to get away from

them. They're in force everywhere you can possibly go. All creation is bound by that Law, it must obey the Law of God or suffer the consequences. You can go to Challenger Deep at the very bottom of the Pacific, or you can go up to the International Space Station, and you will not get away from God. If that is the case, then you won't escape God's wrath. You cannot run from God. You cannot run from what God expects of you, and what God expects of you is as simple as it is impossible: God expects you to be perfect.

We naturally resent this, we know we can't be, but that is the most useful summary of God's Law. God created this world and created us perfect and He expects us to be perfect 100% of the time. If you are not perfect, the Law condemns you as a sinner. You cannot work your way out of this, because you can never be perfect. Paul makes this completely clear because we are very stubborn in our belief that we can get it right all by ourselves. We never will.

Again, this is all quite depressing, but it serves only to set the stage for Jesus, as you know. **“21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”** Paul says there is another way to be perfect that doesn't involve the Ten Commandments. This way is through faith in Jesus Christ.

Why is this necessary? God must be what He is. He cannot be something He is not, and God tells us what He is. He is perfectly righteous, perfectly just. He must punish evil. He simply must. It doesn't matter if it is a tiny evil or a big awful evil, God must punish evil. That is God's nature, to be the destroyer of all that is evil. Sin means we are evil, so we must be punished. God is also loving, He loves His creation, He loves you, He loves all that He has made. Because of who God is, He has to do both. He cannot stop loving us, and He cannot let evil go unpunished either. So we've set God with a dilemma. He has to do two things, love us, and punish us for our sin. He can't do both, but He has to, because God cannot change who he is. That is why God sent Jesus.

**“For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”**

Propitiation is such a fancy word, but what it means is a substitute. Someone has to be punished for sin. We couldn't survive that punishment. Sin requires more than a spanking or a time-out, it requires eternal death. Since we couldn't survive, God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins instead. Everything Jesus does is received by faith, by believing in it, rather than by earning it. We cannot earn it, we cannot do enough to make ourselves okay in God's sight, but Jesus did everything we could never do. Jesus was perfect, He was God, and that means that Jesus switched places with us. He gave us His perfect, and He took our punishment.

**“This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”** What does it mean that He passed over former sins? Well, God could have simply punished our sins straightaway, instead He offered us a way out of them. Offering Jesus as a sacrifice, as a substitute, ensures that both of God's obligations are satisfied. God must love His children and punish sin. Jesus enables God to do both. **“27 Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28 For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”**

We can't brag about this, because we didn't do it. That was what Luther confronted in his day, and that is what we confront in ours. Luther confronted this idea of “I've got to get to heaven myself” in the form of the Roman Catholic church, which was teaching it at the time and still hammers on this pretty hard today. We confront the same idea. Much of the madness that you see in the world today, behind all of it is a thinly veiled attempt at doing so. People do not even have to believe in God to self-justify. You can see this in funerals, where people attempt to talk about the deceased, what a good person he was,

how wonderful he was to his family. You can see it in society, how we try to cure everything that ails us. You can see it in false religions, how they always boil down to being good enough people to earn heaven.

Talking around death is something people are endlessly creative at doing. We come up with all sorts of ways to tackle the uncomfortable reality of living in a sinful world. We try to blame our problems on the pandemic, on inequality of wealth, on racial prejudice, on the government. We do this because we think that if those problems were fixed everything we be alright. I don't think we're consciously trying to create a heavenly utopia for ourselves, but you would be surprised at the assumptions behind your frustrations. It seems like if we could just do this, or fix that, life would be so much better. That's self-justification. We're all trying to create heaven on our own terms, we fall into this trap so easily.

Amen.