

The Man With The Book.

Text: Psa 119:97-104

Suggested Hymns:

199, 327, 261, 264, 195

1) What The Book Did For The Man

2) What The Man Did For The Book

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Psalm 119:97–104, *⁹⁷ Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day. ⁹⁸ You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; For they are ever with me.*

⁹⁹ I have more understanding than all my teachers, For Your testimonies are my meditation. ¹⁰⁰ I understand more than the ancients, Because I keep Your precepts. ¹⁰¹ I have restrained my feet from every evil way, That I may keep Your word. ¹⁰² I have not departed from Your judgments, For You Yourself have taught me.

¹⁰³ How sweet are Your words to my taste, Sweeter than honey to my mouth! ¹⁰⁴ Through Your precepts I get understanding; Therefore I hate every false way. (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

This passage pulsates with intense love of the Word of God. The life of the man whose work we commemorate today is a living commentary of this text.

Sculptors and portrait painters are the most limited among artists when instantaneous impressions and strong effects are to be obtained. The painter of a landscape or of some historical event can give the scene which he depicts a favourable setting by skilfully grouping the various objects or actors in his picture so as to strengthen the impression which he aims to convey by the principal object or figure in his canvas.

The sculptor, however, must by one masterstroke bring out the essential characteristic trait, the vital element, in the life of his hero. The same is true to a large extent of portrait painting.

Among the artists who have produced statues or portraits of Luther there is a remarkable agreement: they love to show Luther with the Bible.

In Schadow's monument on the marketplace at Wittenberg Luther points to the open Bible; in Rietschel's group monument at Worms he rests his hand on the Bible; Siemering in the monument at Eisenach shows Luther clasping the Bible to his heart with his left hand, while his right hand crushes a Letter of Indulgence.

Lucas Kranach on at least two portraits has painted Luther with the Bible in his hand. Kaulbach in his famous painting "*The Age of the Reformation*" has placed Luther in the centre of his canvas, holding the open Bible aloft.

In the preface to her charming tale "*Martin of Mansfeld*," Miss Seebach indulges in the following reminiscence from her own life: "Many years ago a small girl, browsing about in her grandfather's library, found a picture of a boy who seemed to be doing just what she was. He had found something that interested him very much in a big book that lay on the floor.

Of course, she wondered what it was; but the words telling her about the picture were long and hard; so she only managed to learn the boy's name and that of the big book which kept him so busy. She wanted to know more about him. Looking through the book at the other pictures, she found one of him as a man, still busy with the same book. Finally she saw the picture of a great monument, and there the same man stood, still holding the same book."

The movement 505¹ years ago which we commemorate today was started, guided, and brought to a happy finish by a divine agency, the Book, and by a human instrument, the man. These two God had joined together.

The Book made the man what he is to millions of people today. The heroic faith of the man has given to the Book the value which the Christian Church attaches to it today.

Take the Book away from the man, try to think of him without the Book, and he becomes nothing. It is doubtful whether we would know today as much as his name.

On the other hand, take the man away from the Book, gag him, put him in jail, keep him from proclaiming the message of the Book, make a bonfire of all that he wrote in defence of the Book, and tell me, what would, humanly speaking, have become of the Book?

If the attempt that was made to silence the man and suppress his writings had succeeded, the Bible would not be what it is today, the People's Book.

It is highly appropriate, then, that we consider on this festival occasion, with the help of God, *The Man with the Book*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. What The Book Did For The Man

LUTHER'S EARLIEST VIEW OF THE BIBLE

God prepared the Reformer for his work by sending him to the Bible. The hours which the young student Luther at the University of Erfurt spent over the Bible proved to be formative for his life work. The Bible became exceedingly fascinating to him.

He had learned portions of it before, but he had never seen a complete copy of the Book. He had never come under the gripping influence of the entire Bible: its striking sayings, which he remembered from hearing them at church and school, he had not seen in their true connection.

At that time Luther was still under the spell of a belief which he had drunk with his mother's milk and which the Church had impressed on his young mind, namely, that God is a terrible being, whom a sinner cannot approach without a shudder, and Jesus, the future Judge of all the earth, a tyrant, whose anger men must appease by good works, the intercession of saints, especially of the Mother Mary, and by purchasing indulgences.

Luther was at that time reading the Bible through the spectacles of a false faith. This state of affairs continued for about ten years. Luther was habitually misreading the lessons of the Book. Its primary lesson of salvation he did not comprehend. He misjudged the central figure of the Book, Jesus Christ.

He could not get any meaning out of the central teaching of the Book, namely, that in the Gospel of Jesus Christ there is revealed the righteousness of God by grace through faith. He thought that he must make himself righteous by pleasing Christ.

LUTHER'S GREAT DISCOVERY

The scales fell from his eyes in a memorable hour: he perceived that the Book was telling him he must not make himself righteous by what he was trying to do for Christ, but that he was already righteous by what Christ had done for him, for Martin Luther.

Christ had suffered all the punishment for Martin Luther's sins. What Christ had done, God regarded as if Martin Luther had done it. Luther saw with amazement that all his shortcomings, slips, faults, sins, had been cancelled, wiped out, atoned for, by the life and death of the Son of God, made Man for him.

Martin Luther was a free man. So was every other person in the world. No person, no devil could lay anything to their charge. That was what the Book was telling people to believe. That was what the Gospel meant.

It was indeed a memorable hour when this knowledge flashed into the bruised and confused heart of the monk Luther. He relates that in that moment the gates of paradise were thrown open for him. He looked straightway into the heart of his Father in heaven and saw Him beaming with tenderest affection upon the benighted friar, who had so long and so grievously misunderstood Him.

That hour gave to Luther his Saviour. It also gave him his Bible. For only after he had learnt to regard Jesus Christ aright, the Scriptures opened up to him their full meaning in all their grandeur and glory.

Henceforth the Bible was to him the divine answer to all questions regarding this life and the life to come, the charter of his spiritual liberty, the unerring teacher of truth and right, the source of peace, joy, and strength in the inner man, the radiant guiding star of immortal hope.

"Whoever wants to study the Bible well," he says, "should relate all that it says to Jesus Christ." Again: "Whoever does not rightly and clearly understand this Man, whose name is Jesus Christ, should leave the Bible alone; for he will surely find it full of offence."

We do not have the time to show in detail how the Book made this man Luther. Let only one instance suffice to show how thoroughly the Bible had permeated the thought of Luther and his followers.

In the year 1536 the Protestants met at Smalcald to draw up a statement of their belief, to be submitted to a General Council of the Church. Into these Smalcald Articles Luther wrote the famous statement which has since become the slogan of the Lutheran Church: The true rule is this: *“The Word of God shall establish articles of faith; and no one else, not even an angel.”*²

2. What The Man Did For The Book

The Lutheran Church has been charged with idolatrous veneration of the Bible. Having gotten rid of the human pope, our Church is said to have set up a paper pope, the Bible, to which we are said to bow slavishly.

This is simply describing a good action in bad terms. Luther was a Bible man, and the Lutheran Church wants to be nothing but a Bible Church. It grew, like Luther, out of the Bible, and in no point does it want to get away from the Bible. It stands on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief Cornerstone. If this is idolatry and slavery, it is a blessed state to be in.

However, let those who denounce us as idolatrous Bible worshipers examine the grounds of their own belief and see whether they have not set up a real idol in their hearts in opposition to the Bible, namely, their own reason and their human sentiments, feelings, emotions, in matters of religion.

Let them make sure that they have not cast away the objective basis for men’s faith, which God has laid down for all, and in its place have adopted a subjective basis, which changes with the fleeting imaginations, fashions, and popular notions of men.

On the ground on which Luther and the Lutherans stand, anyone can stand who wants to worship God in spirit and in truth.

LUTHER MAKES THE BIBLE THE PEOPLE’S BOOK

The Bible was a rare book in Luther’s boyhood. The art of printing was not half a century old when Luther went to school. Popular education was in its infancy. The people who could not read or write were in the majority.

Bible reading was not encouraged. Permission had to be obtained from the authorities of the Church, before a layman could read the Bible. Permission, when given, was restricted to the reading of a Bible approved by the Church.

That Bible was full of faults and so clumsily translated that its true sense did not appear.

It contained portions that do not belong in the Bible at all, namely, the so-called apocryphal books, which the original Church never had accepted as God's Word. To defeat the true teaching of the Bible, annotations were affixed to such texts which contradicted the teachings and practices of the Church. The real Bible can be said to have been an unknown book in Luther's boyhood.

LUTHER'S BIBLE PREACHING

Luther changed this state of affairs, first, through his expository Bible preaching. The very earliest sermons of Luther show an altogether different character from the customary preaching of that time, which was to a great extent a religious farce.

Luther preached the Bible, not only in the sense that he took a text from the Bible, but also in the sense that he explained and applied the text to his hearers.

This is what made Luther's preaching attractive. It was the sensation of the day. People came distances to hear him. Whenever he passed through a town, he was urged to preach. His churches were crowded.

Our Church learned a lesson for all time in those days, which it has expressed in her confessional writings thus: "*There is nothing that more attaches people to the church than good preaching.*"³ Good preaching is Bible preaching. When the preacher makes much of the Book, the people make much of his sermon. Lutheran preachers know this to be a fact. The most popular preaching — in the best sense! — in any age is Bible preaching.

LUTHER'S TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE

Luther, furthermore, put the Bible, which was originally written in Hebrew and Greek, directly into the people's hands. Even among the learned in Luther's days only a few understood those ancient languages. The Bible was mostly read in the faulty translation authorised by the Roman Church. The common people, of course, did not understand Latin either.

It was during his enforced exile at the Wartburg that the thought came to Luther: to make the people intelligent judges and co-operators in the struggle

with the Papacy, they must be given the real Bible and thus be put in a position to judge for themselves, which side was right, and which wrong, in this conflict.

With wonderful energy Luther prepared a new translation of the New Testament and brought the manuscript with him when he returned to Wittenberg. It was printed as cheaply as possible and was given a marvellous reception. Everywhere people were reading their New Testament: in the shops and the stores, out in the fields and in the evenings at home the Bible was the common topic of conversation.

The priests discovered that laymen knew more of the Book than themselves, and they were dumbfounded by the questions the people asked them.

Luther's German translation of the Bible was the instrument of paramount efficiency in making the Reformation a people's movement. Next in importance came Luther's masterful expositions of the various books of the Bible, in which he showed how the Bible interprets itself, one passage explaining the meaning of the other.

Lastly, Luther gave to the world the Bible in a nutshell in that precious booklet which has been called "*the laymen's Bible*," namely, the Small Catechism, which condensed in a wonderful manner, even for children, the blessed teachings of the Scriptures.

What the Psalmist in our text has said about God's Book and his relation to it, that was a conviction deeply implanted in Luther's heart. He has called the 119th Psalm his own Psalm and the golden ABC of Christians, from which they draw all their knowledge, assurance, and holy impulses in matters of their religion. It is to him the concentrated truth of all the Scriptures.

What the Book did for Luther it still does for every earnest, sincere Bible reader: it makes the reader a full-grown person in the stature of Jesus Christ. May it make us stalwart believers in God's truth and undaunted Bible men and women like Luther. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Posting of the 95 Theses, 31 Oct 1517

² Article II (The Mass) Para 15

³ Apology, Article XXIV (The Mass) Para 50, Concordia, The Lutheran Confessions P 228,
Triglotta p 401