

Grant us grace, heavenly Father, to confess Jesus and so remain on the unshakable rock of our salvation. Amen. (*The Lutheran Study Bible, CPH, p. 1618*)

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of--I am speaking as a fool--I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one--I am talking like a madman--with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

In Christ Jesus, in whom you and I only have reason to boast while contrasting the shame of our own weaknesses, dear fellow redeemed:

It is common for us as Lutherans on this our observance of Reformation Day to glory in Martin Luther's bold confession before Pope and Emperor alike. He publicly cast the former's bull of excommunication into the fire and publicly standing before the latter he gave this response: "*Here I stand ... I cannot and will not recant.*" But all such glorying is truly out of place. This was not the demeanor of Luther at the time when he made those public confessions nor when he recounted them later. He, as a truly humbled repentant Christian sinner, knew and felt his many weaknesses.

It is well attested from the very beginning that confessing the truths of God's Word does not lead to the praise from the world of unbelief. In truth it has always and will always be opposed in this sinful and broken world. But what we can learn from our text today, Paul's recounting of all sorts of opposition from without and within, that **Despite Great Opposition, God's Word Will Never Fail.**

We should first establish why it appears that Paul is arrogantly boasting in our text. He was dealing with those in the Corinthian congregation who were seeking to set themselves up as genuine Apostles and disparaged Paul as a legitimately called Apostle of the Lord Jesus. As he admitted he was talking like a fool. He engaged in such foolish talk to counteract the foolishly groundless boasting coming from these false "*apostles*". He was exposing them for who they actually were in defense of the Lord of the Church and His people in the Corinthian congregation.

Paul could match these meaningless boasts, because he like them was a Jew, a Hebrew, an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham. But so what? This did not produce any special status before God in heaven. Christ Jesus came to save all people from all tribes, peoples and nations. So just as it earned nothing for Paul, so it did not earn any special status for his slanderous accusers.

He even boasted about his work as a missionary in the name of Christ and His Church. Paul did not receive any pay for his missionary work, but supplemented his journeys as a tent maker. But his work as missionary was intense especially filled with all sorts of anxiety for those new Christians and the dangers they were in from their spiritual enemies. In addition they were performed under the great stresses of natural challenges presented in the wilderness and out on open sea. But again these labors and their attendant stresses and anxieties did not earn him anything before God. His faithfulness to his vocation was expected of him, but produced no righteousness for himself before God who had called him to it.

Paul also listed the many acts of persecution perpetrated against him by Jesus' enemies. These were not unexpected. Jesus had warned His Apostles of these hateful attacks against the Gospel. Just as our Lord was attacked and persecuted for the sake of the Gospel, so would all those who would follow proclaiming the same truth to the unbelieving world. The world hates the Gospel which speaks of the Savior, since unbelief does not want to admit that its level of unrighteousness is insufficient to enter heaven.

None of these many boasts Paul could and did make proved anything to his false accusers. But in the minds of the Corinthian Christians they could compare and contrast Paul's "boasts" and the boasts of the false "*apostles*" and draw the conclusion that they were equally inconsequential and powerless to save. Rather in contrast was the Word that Paul proclaimed, the pure Gospel of which alone brings the unconditional blessings of forgiveness, life and salvation. False prophets often bring a man-made religion of more laws and

condemnation. No amount of bluster could hide the differences between the Lord's religion of pure grace with that of false religion and its multitudinous onerous demands.

II

This was the very same contrast many Christians came to recognize and appreciate in the Lutheran Reformation. Rome had a system of man-made laws, which produced the uncertainty of salvation, whereas Luther was enabled by God's grace to bring to light once again the Gospel of God's love for all people in His Son. Not only did Jesus serve as our holy substitute in His suffering and death making full and complete payment for all sin, He was also the sinner's substitute under the Law producing the life of righteousness for us all needed to enter heaven. All this was done for us freely and its benefits are all received through faith.

Paul found reason to boast in his many weaknesses, because they focused on the strength of his Lord alone. Remember how as an unbeliever he was marching toward Damascus to persecute those who confessed Christ. But instead our Lord met Saul on his road of rampage, converting him. Then in order to leave that city, Paul left in great humility since he was being hunted as a Christian. So he was lowered in a basket out of a window. God outwitted the governor who sought to seize Paul, by using His people to sneak Paul out. Where was Paul's strength found in that episode – bold hunter became the vulnerable hunted prey? He would experience incident after incident, which would demonstrate his personal weakness and the Lord's amazing strength in the face of all opposition.

The power of the Word prevailed through all such preachers, whether it was the Apostle Paul or the great Reformer Martin Luther. These faithful mouthpieces would eventually succumb to death: Paul at the hands of Emperor Nero and Luther by natural causes although harassed from many sides right up to his deathbed. Regardless, the Word has never been received well by the world. It has met violent responses ever since the beginning in the first Century, certainly in the Sixteenth Century, and even today in the Twenty-first Century. Yet the Word of God's love for us in Christ still prevails to this day. No attacks from without or within the outward Church have prevailed. The violent continue to take it by force as they put their old sinful natures to death daily by drowning them in the waters of baptism. You are among the violent who taken the kingdom of heaven by force by daily putting to death your old sinful nature.

The Apostle went from violently attacking the Gospel to one who proclaimed it with an energy that could be characterized as

violent in its outreach to a world, which so desperately needs to hear it and believe it. Luther went from violently attacking the Gospel in the solitude of his overworked conscience with all its terrors, in the cloister of the monastery, in the confessional before a father confessor to one who dared speak violently the truth of God's Word to power with words of resistance and defiance.

Where have you come from in your spiritual struggles my fellow redeemed? Have you once joined in the violent responses to the Gospel along with the world around you, in your mind, with your attitudes, even with your words? Your faith in Christ has now led you to abandon all such boasts in your strengths and turn to your weaknesses to find the strength of the God who has saved you alone through the works of His Son in your place. Repent and believe in that Word of forgiveness in Christ. Be the instrument our Lord has called you to be in your vocations and witness the violent take the kingdom by force just like you, like Luther, like Paul. Amen.