

**5<sup>th</sup> November 2017**

**Romans 5.1-11; Galatians 2.15-21**

It's 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to a church door in Wittenberg and kickstarted the Protestant Reformation.<sup>i</sup>

Five hundred years ago, a discovery was made that would change the world, unleashing happiness wherever it went. Today it is still transforming lives and cultures.

The secret was this: failing, broken people “are attractive because they are loved,” said Martin Luther, “they are not loved because they are attractive.”

That could not be more counter-cultural. It is deep in our blood today that the more attractive we make ourselves then the more loved and happy we will be. We work hard and then we get rewards. The Reformation was a story of one man discovering to his delight that with God, it is the other way round. God does not love people because they have sorted themselves out: he loves failures, and that love makes them flourish.

Another word for that type of love is Grace. Martin Luther rediscovered the gospel of Grace. God loves us

without us doing anything to deserve that love. That love is shown through the death of Jesus on the cross. The cross tells us that God loves us, loves you – so much he was prepared to die for you. That's grace.

Grace is still in fashion because it is so life changing.

**Stormzy**, is an English grime and hip hop artist. (This is my blatant attempt to get the youth listening at this point.) His debut album, *Gang Signs & Prayer*, was released on 24 February 2017 and was the first grime album to reach number one on the UK Albums Chart. He is a Christian and some of his songs speak of his faith.

Blinded by your grace has these lyrics as the chorus:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXdwITYewrg>

Lord, I've been broken  
Although I'm not worthy  
You fixed me, I'm blinded by your grace  
You came and saved me

Grace says we can't save ourselves: we need a Saviour – and the gospel proclaims that we do have a Saviour in Jesus.

## **This is the secret of happiness**

It started on 31st October 1517, when Luther, a German monk, posted 95 theses for debate on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The theses were about matters of love and forgiveness, but the reason he wrote them, he explained, was because if these matters were not dealt with, it would “make Christians unhappy”.

Luther was concerned with people’s happiness. In fact, he would come to believe he’d discovered the secret of happiness. And that, at its heart, was what the Reformation was all about. Not moralising. Not self-improvement. It was a discovery of stunningly happy news – news that would transform millions of lives and change the world.

This is the story of that discovery.

## **First of all Luther experienced an inner journey from despair to delight**

When he was 21-year-old Luther was caught in a sudden and violent storm while walking to his university in Erfurt, Germany, a lightning bolt smashed him to the ground. Terrified, he cried out, “Saint Anne, help me! I shall become a monk!” And so the young Luther survived the storm and began the life of a monk.

Luther’s deepest fear was of dying and having to stand before the judgement of God. But becoming a monk gave him what he saw as a golden opportunity: he could make himself more attractive to God and so – hopefully – earn his love.

And he went for it. Every few hours he would leave his tiny monastery cell and make his way to a service in the chapel, starting with matins in the middle of the night, then another at six in the morning, another at nine, another at twelve, and so on. He often took no bread or water for three days at a time, and was quite prepared to freeze in the winter cold in the hope that his actions might somehow please God. Driven to confession, he would exhaust his confessors, taking up to six hours at a time to catalogue his most recent sins.

Yet the more he did, the more troubled he became. Was it enough? Were his motives right?

He was to discover the difference between religion and the gospel. When people start doing religion they can fall into traps. They can become neurotic that they are not doing the right things – they are trying to be good but they are worried that they are not good enough, not living up to the standards. They are not making the grade. If they fall ill

they can even believe it is God punishing them because they have done something wrong.

The alternative danger of religion is those who think they are good and become self-righteous and look down at other people who they see as failures, or not as good and loving or tolerant and open minded as you are – because self-righteousness can affect liberal minded people as much as conservative disposition. When trouble or suffering comes those who believe they have been living an upstanding life believe they deserve a decent happy life and when life goes wrong they get a debilitating anger and become furious with God because they think God owes them a better deal.

I hope you can see the dangers of religion. Christianity is not a religion – in the sense that it is not about trying to be good and win God's acceptance or earn a reward. It is about the gospel of grace through Jesus Christ. It is the revelation that God is love and you are loved.

Luther experienced himself sinking into an ever-deeper introspection.

He began to sense that his moral dirtiness and lack of attractiveness to God went deeper than his behaviour. He

came to see himself as a man curved in on himself and fundamentally selfish. All his good conduct and religious behaviour was only disguising the problem, not solving it.

Worse, he was coming to see God as a loveless tyrant who demanded perfection and gave nothing but punishment. "Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience," he later wrote.

"I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, I was angry with God."

And in that dark, dark place he made his happy discovery.

Studying the Bible in his cell, he was struggling to understand what the apostle Paul meant in his letter to the Romans: "For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (1:17).

What on earth could that mean? And what exactly is 'the righteousness of God'?

Is it that God is upright and I'm not, so I can't be with him? That's what Luther had thought. But, he wrote, "I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that

by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith.”

It was as if his whole world had flipped inside out. God, he saw, is not asking us to earn his love and acceptance in any way. God’s righteousness is something he shares with us as a gift. Acceptance before God, forgiveness and peace with him can be received with simple faith or trust.

Here in the Bible, Luther found, is truly good news: a kind and generous God who does not ask people to make themselves attractive before he loves them, but who loves first.

Instead of trusting in his own efforts to be good, Luther saw that he could simply accept God’s word of promise. Then all his struggles and all his anxiety could be replaced with happy confidence and peace.

“Here,” said Luther ecstatically, “I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”

### **The joyful exchange**

Luther soon wrote a little booklet to explain his discovery. He called it *The Freedom of a Christian*. In it he said that the good news he had found was like the story of a wealthy king (representing Jesus Christ) who marries a

debt-ridden prostitute (representing someone who will trust him).

The girl could never make herself a queen. But then the king comes along, full of love for her. And on their wedding day he makes his marriage vow to her. With that, she is his, and the prostitute becomes a queen. He takes and bears all her debts, and she now shares his boundless wealth and status. It is not that she earned it. She didn’t become a queen by behaving royally. Indeed, she does not know how to behave royally. But when the king made his marriage promise, he changed her status. For all her backstreet ways, the poor girl is now a queen.

In the same way, the greatest failure who accepts Jesus Christ gets to share his righteousness and status. What happens is a happy status-swap: when Jesus died on the cross, he dealt with all our guilt and failure; and out of sheer love he now shares all his righteousness and life with those who’ll trust him.

Jesus Christ’s death on the cross was the key moment. On the cross Jesus took and died for our guilt so that we could be forgiven. Luther called it “the joyful exchange”.

“There was no remedy except for God’s only Son to step into our distress,” he wrote. But because of the cross,

“God is reconciled thereby and receives into grace and forgiveness of sins all who believe in this Son.”

In other words, Jesus loves broken failures and makes them attractive and beautiful in God’s sight.

It means, wrote Luther gleefully, “Her sins cannot now destroy her, since they are laid upon Christ and swallowed up by him. And she has that righteousness in Christ, her husband, which she may boast of as her own and say, ‘If I have sinned, yet my Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned, and all his is mine and all mine is his.’”

### **Just a clean-up?**

People sometimes think of the Reformation as little more than a 500-year-old clean-up job on the Roman Catholic Church. Yet it was others, not Luther, who dedicated themselves to opposing such moral corruption. Almost everyone seemed eager for that sort of reform. But if that had been what Luther was about, he’d have been forgotten in a decade.

Five hundred years on, we remember the Reformation because it was not just another call to do better. It was the recovery of a message that had got buried – a world-changing message which will last for all centuries.

Luther had stumbled across something people had not heard of in their day: “sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.”

### **The sweetest pleasure**

“Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

Those words, written by a team of scholars in Westminster in the 1640s, capture the heart of the Reformation. For what Luther’s discovery had made abundantly clear was that God is glorious: beautiful, good, kind and generous. We can therefore actually enjoy God. Not hate. Not avoid. *Enjoy.*

The practical consequences throughout cultures influenced by the Reformation were vast. Take Johann Sebastian Bach, an ardent Lutheran all the way down to his tapping toes. When satisfied with his musical compositions, Bach would write on them ‘SDG’ for *Soli Deo Gloria* (‘Glory to God alone’). Through his music he wanted to sound out the beauty and glory of God, so pleasing both God and people.

The glory of God, he believed, gratuitously rings out through sunsets, stars, mountain peaks and music, bringing joy wherever it is appreciated. And the enjoyment of those

things can give people a taste of how enjoyable their creator is.

Luther enjoyed life. He sang, played the lute and composed hymns, especially for children. He said: "I have no use for cranks who despise music, because it is a gift of God."

He promoted beer drinking. He said: "Whoever drinks beer, is quick to sleep; whoever sleeps long, does not sin; whoever does not sin, enters heaven! Thus, let us drink beer!"

Although he was a monk he got married, enjoyed sex and raised a family.

God creation is to be enjoyed. But Luther was absolutely clear that the deepest and most satisfying happiness can only be found in knowing God.

This was all quite different to what so many had known before. As a monk, Luther had said, "I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God." Doubtful of whether they had made themselves worthy of heaven, people shook with fear at the thought of how God might judge them.

You can still feel it when you see a medieval fresco of the Last Judgment, the naked dead seized by grotesque demons and forced into the fire. You can hear it in the

words of the Dies Irae that would be chanted in every Mass for the Dead: "Day of wrath, day that will dissolve the world into burning coals... My prayers are not worthy, but do Thou, Good (God), deal kindly lest I burn in perennial fire."

Yet armed with his new discovery, Luther saw that he could face such fears like this: "When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: 'I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where he is, there I shall be also.'"

And so the horrifying Doomsday became for him what he would call "the most happy Last Day"

### **The next 500 years**

There was a bad side to the reformation which we will consider next week. Battles, kings, conquests and empires: all get forgotten in time though. Good ideas don't.

That's why they'll still be celebrating the Reformation in 500 years' time. Because the Reformation wasn't just a

moment in history; it was about the recovery of beautiful truths.

Today, we live in an age of extraordinary technological advance. We're in the midst of a revolution which is arguably even more substantial than the invention of the printing press which enabled Reformation ideas to spread so quickly. But while technology is doing wonders for our health, work and lifestyle, it is clearly failing to provide us with any deep and lasting satisfaction. Restless, fearful and lonely, ours is a generation self-medicating on the internet, alcohol and anything to fill the void.

For us today, the Reformation still has sparkling good news – news of an enjoyable and satisfying God. A God who lavishes his love on those who have not made

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<sup>i</sup> Sermon taken from article by Michael Reeves in Premier Christianity magazine October 2017: <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2017/October-2017/The-Grace-Awakening-How-the-Reformation-changed-the-world> **Michael Reeves oversees the work of [Union School of Theology](#) and teaches in the areas**

themselves attractive to him. A God whose love can liberate the most broken and guilty.

What Luther discovered in the Bible pulled him out of despair and made him feel he had “entered paradise itself through open gates”. Nothing about that message has changed – or lost its power to brighten lives today.

Lord, I've been broken  
Although I'm not worthy  
You fixed me, I'm blinded by your grace  
You came and saved me.

**of systematic and historical theology and also on preaching and spiritual formation. His booklet *Freedom Movement* is available to churches now [christianheritagelondon.com](http://christianheritagelondon.com)**