



A BIBLE STUDY ON FREDERICK THE WISE

Lutheran Prince and Protector

“The Day is Surely Drawing Near”

(TLH 611; LW 462; LSB 508)

(Luke 21:25–36; Matt. 25:31–46; 1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 Cor. 15:51–57)

Legend recounts a prophetic dream given to Frederick III on Oct. 30, 1517. The elector dreamed that God had sent him a theologian after the apostle Paul. This monk asked Frederick for permission to write on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. After receiving permission, the monk began to write in such large characters that Frederick could read the writing at his residence at Schweinitz, almost 30 miles from Wittenberg. The pen that he used was so large that its end reached as far as Rome, where it pierced the ears of a crouching lion there and caused the tiara on the pope to begin to topple. All the princes of the empire attempted to break the pen; but the more they tried, the stronger it became. Then Frederick asked the monk where this pen had come from. “The pen,” he replied, “belonged to a hundred-year-old goose of Bohemia.”

This account not only links Luther to the pre-reformer Jan Hus, it also connects Frederick the Wise with his God-given role as protector of the Wittenberg monk. God’s grace through the Holy Scriptures effected a gradual but decided change in Frederick’s understanding of salvation. His early years followed medieval Europe’s understanding that the end of the sinful and dying world was just around the corner. With his move back to the authority of the Holy Scriptures, his naive attempts to gain the Lord’s favor by amassing tens of thousands of relics gave way to a true understanding of the freely offered mercy and forgiveness of Christ. Frederick was tempted to hand over the trouble-making Martin Luther to the Roman Catholic authorities on several occasions, but the elector protected Luther and the Gospel rediscovered by his university’s professor of theology.

STANZA ONE

*The day is surely drawing near/When Jesus, God’s
anointed,/In all His power shall appear/As judge whom
God appointed./Then fright shall banish idle mirth,/And
flames on flames shall ravage earth/As Scripture long has
warned us.*

Frederick lived in the last days, just as we live in the last days. Chaos, violence, natural calamities and persecution of the true Gospel continued to increase

— the beginnings of the final end. Before the coming of Luther and the Reformation, Frederick, convicted of the coming wrath of the Almighty, sought to escape from the impending judgment through the human work of adoring holy relics.

1. The people of Frederick’s day were convinced that Christ in all His power and fury would soon appear. There were plenty of natural calamities, wars and rumors of wars. Sin and its deadly effects were part of daily life. Fear and terror of God’s impending judgment increased. (SEE LUKE 21:25–28.) Do we see parallels to today’s world? What does Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Creed say about our belief in the last days and what follows? (COMPARE WITH 1 COR. 15:51–52.)

2. Frederick and his subjects uncritically put their trust in purchasing indulgences and adoring relics, but at the same time they were increasingly disgusted with the immorality of the Church of Rome. In what ways are some organizations that call themselves Christian being exposed as “Babylon” — immoral and perverting the true teachings of the Bible?

STANZAS TWO

*The final trumpet then shall sound,/And all the earth be
shaken,/And all who rest beneath the ground,/Shall from
their sleep awaken./But all who live will in that hour,/By
God’s almighty, boundless pow’r,/Be changed at His
commanding.*

During the days of Frederick III, the heavenly harbingers announcing the beginning of the end seemed to have arrived in earnest. The monk Martin Luther began to present a clear understanding of the corruption of Rome in contrast to salvation by grace alone, received by faith alone — all based on the Holy Scriptures alone. Frederick took to heart Luther’s admonition that redemption was not to be found in indulgences or relics — or even in the fallen human judgments of a pope or church council.

3. “We are living in the last days” is heard more and more. What current events make people today come to this conclusion? How is the Lutheran understanding of the last days beginning at the time of the apostles radically different than mainstream beliefs by Christians today? (SEE HEB. 1:1–2; ACTS 2:15–17; JOEL 2:28–32.)

4. Frederick the Wise began to question his building of a great collection of relics that would give himself and his subjects a way to amass merits that would earn heaven and a shortened amount of suffering in purgatory. The Dominican friar Johann Tetzel’s sale of indulgences just across the river from Wittenberg in the spring of 1517 added to Frederick’s reconsideration of the beliefs and practices being enforced by Rome. How is the false belief in salvation earned through human works being marketed to the masses today?

STANZAS THREE

*The books are opened then to all,/A record truly telling/
What each has done, both great and small,/When he on
earth was dwelling,/And ev’ry heart be clearly seen,/And
all be known as they have been/In thoughts and words and
actions.*

Luther’s understanding of the greatness of our helpless, fallen human condition was a prerequisite to the greater redemption won for us and the world by Christ. All our works — even as Christians — are stained with sin and self-interest. But at our Baptism, a Christ-like nature has been created within us, a new nature that freely — under no compulsion or threat — responds in faith and joy and service to God and neighbor.

5. What does the Bible plainly teach about our fallen human attempts to earn salvation by good works? What is the sole source of our righteous thoughts, words and deeds? Who gets all glory and honor for the good works wrought in us and through us?

6. Why is our repentance not only based on the sin we have done and the good we have failed to do, but a confession about our very nature: “I, a poor, miserable sinner”? Why does St. Paul reveal that without true faith in Christ and His merits, outwardly nice behavior by those who call themselves atheists or Muslims or Christians is actually nothing other than sin? (SEE ROM. 14:23B.)

STANZAS FOUR

*Then woe to those who scorned the Lord/And sought
but carnal pleasures,/Who here despised His precious
Word/And loved their earthly treasures!/With shame
and trembling they will stand/And at the judge’s stern
command/To Satan be delivered.*

The money from indulgences bought by Elector Frederick’s subjects was taken to Rome to fund the extravagances of St. Peter’s Basilica — and to pay off half

the enormous debt incurred when Albert of Brandenburg borrowed 21,000 gold ducats to give to Rome to become the archbishop of Mainz. It was Rome’s insatiable hunger for prestige and earthly treasures that caused it to obscure and ultimately despise the truth of Christ’s Word, substituting it for a demonic disdain for the true Gospel of grace.

7. Luther strongly condemned the practice of the Roman Catholic Church in selling church positions to the highest bidder. This corruption further disgusted Frederick and his subjects and created even more animosity between the regions of Germany and those in Italy who demanded unquestioned authority from all Christians in the west while showing more interest in enlarging their coffers than the spiritual suffering of the people that Christ put under their care. How is the temptation to despise the Lord’s saving gifts as real today as it was in Frederick’s day? (SEE NUM. 21:5; 2 PETER 2:10.)

8. Christ had much to say about the Christian’s temptation to put trust in earthly treasures. (See Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13.) Review Luther’s explanation of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism. What happens when we mistakenly put our trust in earthly things, especially when we are in desperate situations?

STANZAS FIVE

*My Savior paid the debt I owe/And for my sin was smitten;
/Within the Book of Life I know/My name has now been
written./I will not doubt, for I am free,/And Satan cannot
threaten me;/There is no condemnation!*

It was Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone who gave His precious life-blood to atone for all the world’s sin. The empty promises of liberation from purgatory promised by Tetzel and others through payments and distributions out of Rome’s supposed “treasury of merits” nullified Christ and His work on the cross. Because we have been baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, our names have been written in heaven’s Book of Life — regardless of the constant accusations of the devil.

9. Read aloud Luther’s explanation of the Second Article of the Creed. What sources did Luther use in crafting this confession? Why have many said this paragraph of the catechism is almost hymnic in its presentation of Christ and the Gospel?

10. When any religion begins to treat the redemption of sinners by calculating amounts of money for amounts of saint-earned merits for amounts of sins in need of neutralizing, something demonic is going on. Why is it natural for our old, unbelieving nature to start bargaining with gold and silver and supposed good works when under the threats of Satan? What kind of bargain with God are we tempted to make in the face of terror and despair?

STANZAS SIX

May Christ our intercessor be/And through His blood and merit / Read from His book that we are free/With all who life inherit./Then we shall see Him face to face,/With all His saints in that blest place/ Which He has purchased for us.

Under Luther and the Reformation, Frederick broke with the mistaken medieval belief that the saints should be the object of our prayers and their relics the object of our devotion. The elector's trust in the saints as the intercessors for the Christian's pleas for mercy and protection to a distant and stern God gave way to a faithful picture of Christ as Savior of all mercy and comfort — a Savior who does not sit in heaven and wait for us to try and build a ladder through our own good works.

11. How is the Parable of the Lost Sheep (LUKE 15:1–7) a corrective to the world's view that we must climb our way to heaven through our own merits (or the purchased merits of the saints)?

12. Review what the Holy Scriptures teach regarding the true means by which redemption is won for all who will believe it. What did our redemption cost us? What did our redemption cost Christ?

STANZAS SEVEN

O Jesus Christ, do not delay,/But hasten our salvation;/We often tremble on our way/In fear and tribulation/O hear and grant our fervent plea;/Come, mighty judge, and set us free/From death and ev'ry evil

Without true faith in the merits of Jesus, the world's twisted version of salvation wishes that the end of time would be delayed as long as possible. In the days of Elector Frederick III, the Roman Catholic Church was too busy glorifying and enlarging its opulent earthly kingdom to pray, "Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly!" Frederick learned what it meant to truly pray, "O Jesus Christ, do not delay, but hasten our salvation." By the end of his life, he confessed the true treasures of the true kingdom of Christ as he received the Lord's Supper in both kinds (the body and blood of Christ in, with and under the bread and wine of the altar). This was against Rome's refusal to restore the chalice to the laity when the Lord's Supper was celebrated.

13. How is receiving the Lord's Supper in a congregation that is true to Christ and His Word and Sacraments a public confession of the Christian faith? (SEE 1 COR. 11:26.) How does this fly in the face of believing Holy Communion is nothing more than my private experience of the Jesus now up in heaven?

14. Frederick the Wise turned down Rome's offer to make him the Holy Roman Emperor. He determined, instead, to be a servant and defender of the people Christ had put under his care: Martin Luther and the subjects of Electoral Saxony. (Frederick also made preparations for his son to rule Saxony, outwardly confessing his Lutheran faith.) How are we tempted to neglect or abandon our God-given vocations for something that seems more holy and glorious?