

Freedom! Don't you long for freedom! But freedom isn't free. It's so costly that people throughout the ages have been willing to fight for it, even to lay down their lives for it. Do you realize you have a freedom more precious than any political freedom? The freedom for which the Lutheran Reformation stands is a freedom of your soul for time and eternity. What does it cost? It costs you and me nothing! We receive it by faith in Jesus. But what did it cost God to set us free? It cost the terrifying, lonely, cursed death of His own Son, who had become man to pay for our sins.

Shall we take that freedom from sin's curse for granted? You know that whenever people take their freedom for granted, they are one step away from losing it completely. Since powerful enemies threaten to rob us of our freedom, the Savior urges us, **Stand firm in Christ's freedom!**

Through the Holy Spirit's inspiration, this letter to the Galatians deals with a real threat to their freedom. The apostle Paul had brought them the Gospel of freedom in Christ on his first missionary journey. Many turned from their idolatry, from their fear and superstition, to believe that the Son of God had fulfilled all God's righteous Laws for them, and that He nevertheless died - for the sins of all people. By their faith in Jesus they knew they were free from the Law's curse and from any work-righteous system of religion. The Galatians rejoiced in their freedom!

But Christ's enemies were trying to enslave them. False teachers, infiltrating their congregations, were teaching that faith in Christ is not enough. They insisted that to be a child of God you still had to observe certain ceremonies and festivals of the old Jewish Ceremonial Law. They insisted on circumcision as the first step in submitting to the demonic idea you must be saved by still trying to keep some aspect of God's Law.

But the Lord has created humans for freedom, on the basis of a faith relationship with Him. He made Adam and Eve with this freedom, but they lost their faith. Satan enslaved them by leading them to assume they still had to do something to be like God. And Satan is the great deceiver, behind any attempt to enslave people through work-righteous teaching. IN the middle ages, the Dark Ages, the devil had a heyday. Both church and state leaders displayed a shameful, murderous, dishonest attempt for power and wealth. The corruption in the church and state leaders had disastrous effects upon the common people. Ignorance of the Bible, poverty, crime, and vice of every kind were common. Because of the ungodliness practiced by both rich and poor, prince and priest, king and people, the voice of conscience was stifled. The popes and priests deceived the people into accepting lies and superstition as God's will. They invented many of these false doctrines to fill the coffers of the church leaders. The popes, since 600 A.D., had gradually convinced most of the people that they were the representatives of Christ on earth. So whatever

the popes decreed became binding law. The greatest sin by the papacy was the complete denial of salvation by grace through faith. They said, "Christ suffered and died for you. Through Baptism you are freed from all original sin and sins committed before baptism, but any sin after you baptism you must confess to the priests. For those you forget, you are unforgiven! This made confession a torture for Christian conscience. No one can be sure he has confessed all his sins. To make forgiveness complete for the sins which the people confessed, the priests assigned various works of penance, such as fasting, praying the rosary, and pilgrimages to holy shrines. The false doctrine that you must spend a period of intense suffering in purgatory to work off the guilt of your sins before you can go to heaven only increased the pope's power by enslaving more and more people. Finally, the pope sold indulgences, promising that anyone who bought this piece of paper would have his stay in purgatory shortened. Imagine the slavery! The sale of indulgences became an important way of raising money for the Church, and the comforting Bible teaching of salvation by faith was almost completely neglected!

Has Satan stopped trying to enslave people today? The Roman Church, the largest supposedly Christian denomination on earth, claims a billion members. The Pope still claims to be infallible, the only representative of Christ on earth through whom you may ever come to God. Confession to a priest and penance are still necessary to remove the temporal guilt of your sins. Superstitions such as praying to Mary and other saints still abound within this visible Church. But Satan hasn't stopped there. He has infested every visible church denomination with a false theology, with a belief that the Bible is not God's Word but only human ideas about God. Today many churches preach not the Gospel of the crucified and risen Savior for the forgiveness of your sins, but an enslaving Law of doing what is right to get right with God. Some, even in supposedly Christian churches, deny the virgin Birth of Christ, the word-for-word inspiration of Scriptures, and the resurrection of our Lord. Religious ritual captivates many. The grander the worship places, the more the ceremony, the more rhythmic the beat, the greater the programming often become the focus rather than Christ and His Word. Many churches are enslaved to public opinion, preaching only what people want to hear. Our culture seems enslaved to the opinion that there is no God and humans can live any way they want, or only humans can solve the world's problems, without the divine teachings of Scripture to analyze what's wrong with the human heart. Islam is one of the fastest growing religions, not only in the world, but also in North America. What makes it so appealing? It teaches man's duties to gain salvation. It stresses ritual and obedience, prayers, fasting and giving to the poor as ways of earning God's favor. What is Satan doing to try to enslave us in our church body? Is he leading us to worship our traditions, or to assume that because we are Wisconsin Synod we must always be right?

Are we forgetting to look to Scripture alone for our faith and life? Does he lead us to worship ourselves in a sentimental quest for nostalgia? Does he lead us to delight in sin as though just being a church member will save us? Does he lead us to feel so disgusted with ourselves when we examine our pitiful performance, so we feel God will not love or accept us unless we fulfill certain religious obligations? Does he try to enslave us by worry, fear, guilt? Is he trying to enslave us by living only to gratify ourselves for the memento, by living only for the wealth and luxury money can buy? Is he enslaving us with a busy schedule, so busy we crowd out God, Bible study, or worship?

On this Reformation Sunday how fitting we hear the Lord's apostle again: "**It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery!**" Our freedom did not come cheaply. We were bought at a price, the price of Jesus own life, suffering, and death to purchase forgiveness of our sins. Jesus died and rose to deliver us from the Law's slavery and from sins' curse. Since Christ saved us, He is the bridge between us and God, between life and death, between heaven and hell. Stand on Christ with both feet, and you are safe. Place one foot on something else, some kind of work righteousness, some form of false teaching and you are bound to fall. Salvation is a cause of either all or none. 99 percent Christ plus one percent anything else is just as damning as no percent of Christ. "**You who are trying to be justified by Law have been alienated from Christ. You have fallen away from grace.**"

Jesus battled the Pharisees, the priests, the high priest, and their self-righteous grip on the people's consciences. His apostles proclaimed the liberating gospel, and battled those who sought to rob Christ of His glory by the false doctrine that man can contribute to his salvation. This was also the battle in Luther's day in the 1500's. He entered a monastery, supposing his vows and efforts at praying and self-denial, would bring him closer to God. But he found no freedom. Instead he confessed, "**If I had continued any longer, I would have tortured myself to death with prayer, fasting, waking and freezing. Yet I was in such despair that I thought God was not gracious to me.**" But through the Bible he learned God is not his threatening Judge, but his loving Savior. He learned Jesus suffered his wounds to pay for his sin and now He offers full and free salvation. All who believe in Him are God's forgiven children and have eternal life as God promises, for Jesus' sake! Luther protested the sale of indulgences. He debated church officials. He preached against trusting in good works. He proclaimed full and free salvation through faith in Christ. The Catholic church excommunicated him...and he was free! He translated the New Testament into the every day language, and the gospel of freedom spread like wildfire.

Our spiritual fathers contended for this freedom by sending

missionaries to our country in the 1800's. They contended for it by banding together in our synod, a confessional Lutheran synod, standing firmly on Christ's Word. They contended for this freedom in the 1940's, 50's, and early 60's, as they warned others to watch out for modern-day heresy, couched in the age-old lie that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you live your best.

Apart from Christ, we're slaves! In Christ - we're free! Don't neglect your freedom. We who love freedom fight for it with the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. Stand free as you learn the Word of God, as you encourage your fellow believers in worship and Bible study, as you support the publishing, translating, and proclamation of the Bible. Luther knew what was at stake at the time of the Reformation and He insisted on the Christian education of youth. He said, **"Where the Word of God is not the rule, I counsel no one to send His child. Everything must perish where the Word of God is not constantly in use."**

Dear God, forgive the times we have neglected our precious gospel freedom and taken it for granted. Lead us to thank you that we are still children of the Reformation, that we still possess the Bible's blessed freedom, that we still have Christian missions based on the Bible, that we still have Sunday School and our Christian elementary and high schools in which God's Word is taught and Christ's freedom is brought to the next generation. Thank God we still have professors who train our pastors and teachers in Christ's freedom, and pray that God give them courage to continue in it. Let's support cheerfully our Christian parents and their efforts to train their children, our Christian teachers, who daily lead God's children to know and love our Savior. Let's live our liberty and seek it. God help us to stand firm in the freedom in which Christ has set us free! Amen.