

Do your best to come to me quickly, ¹⁰ for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. ¹¹ Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. ¹² I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. ¹³ When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.

¹⁴ Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. ¹⁵ You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.

¹⁶ At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.

¹⁷ But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:9-18)

How Does God Overcome Evil?

Today we're celebrating Reformation Day – which technically falls on October 31st. Of course, you all know the other holiday that we Lutherans are forced to share our celebration with. How many of our kids went trick or treating this year? How many carved jack-o-lanterns? Mine did. Most of you probably know that Halloween's traditions began in superstition. The ancient Celts believed that on October 31st, the dead could walk the earth again. They put out treats to appease them. They wore masks either to honor or to confuse them – either way to keep them away. Today, Halloween is a commercial success. That shows that we don't take those superstitions seriously anymore. We don't believe that ghosts need to be appeased. We're more concerned about local teenagers and mischief on our front lawn.

Superstition is always best left in the past. But that doesn't mean those people were stupid. They were right about one thing: we have a real enemy out there: the devil. He's much scarier than any Halloween costume, because he isn't limited to one day a year. He isn't something that we can drive away with sweets or masks. He's real and evil. The world is full of suffering in part because the devil is so successful. But don't count God out. He's still here. With him, we always win. This morning, we want to look at how God dealt with St. Paul to see how he deals with us in a world full of hurt and evil. **How does God overcome evil?**

I.

Second Timothy is Paul's last letter. He was in prison and he knew he was going to be executed. He knew the evils of this life. And he was uniquely qualified to speak of the way that God overcomes them. **How does God overcome evil? He strengthens us to proclaim the gospel.**

Years earlier, at the end of the book of Acts, Paul had been in Rome under house arrest – under fairly comfortable circumstances. But not this time. This time, Paul was chained in a dungeon somewhere. Roman dungeons were dark, wet, miserable places. So Paul asked for his cloak and for his scrolls, which most likely included his Bible. Paul warned against Alexander, a metal worker, who had done Paul **“a great deal of harm.”** He still posed a threat for Timothy and the other Christians. Now, we don't know what that was all about, but clearly, he was suffering persecution for preaching the gospel.

Paul was almost alone. Only Luke was still with him. A number of his coworkers were working in other places. But one named Demas had deserted him because he loved this world. What does that mean? Demas put this life first. He was more interested in his own comfort and in getting along with people than he was in being faithful to his calling as a Christian. Paul says that at his first defense, no one came to his support. The believers in Rome were too scared to show up. Paul clearly felt abandoned, by some because they were weak and afraid, and by others because their faith was false and they chose this world.

In that place and time, it must have looked like evil was going to triumph. The greatest missionary in the history of the Christian Church was in prison and he told Timothy to hurry to Rome or Timothy wouldn't see him alive. Paul's coworkers were scattered and in disarray. Some were betraying the faith. The devil was surely celebrating. But Paul was not alone and he knew it. As somber as this letter is, Paul's faith had not dimmed. His triumph was not lessened by his captivity or even his impending death. Paul does not engage in self pity even for a moment. He does not question the way God has been taking care of him. Instead he says,

“But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.”

God put Paul in Rome to proclaim the gospel message, fully and clearly, so that the Gentiles might hear it. The devil wants the gospel stopped. He wants the Church silenced. He wants the faith to die. So when he put St. Paul on trial to kill him, God used that trial to make sure that everyone there heard the message of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. That message is the power of God. It's the way God gives faith. So when the devil tried to destroy the faith, all he succeeded in doing was giving God another opportunity to spread it. That's the way it always works. Again and again, down through history, the devil has tried to use force or intimidation to keep Christians from proclaiming his gospel. But God keeps turning the tables on him. Someone once compared preaching the gospel to an oil fire. What happens when you put water on an oil fire? It spreads. The gospel triumphs because God raises up Christians to proclaim that message about Jesus, our Savior.

Do you think you could do that? If you were on trial for your life and all you had to do to get off was deny Jesus, do you think that you could give a fearless testimony about him? On your own, you couldn't. None of us could. But then, neither could Paul. We're all sinners and by ourselves we're all too weak and terrified to achieve anything. But Paul didn't depend on his own strength. He says “The Lord stood by my side and gave me strength.” That's true for us, too. We need God's strength to stand up for the truth in an unbelieving world. And God gives it.

It often seems to us that evil is triumphing. How many horrible things do you see on TV? How often does it seem like we're all alone in our faith? No one else believes what we believe. If your kids go to public school, they may feel like even other Christian kids don't belong to churches like ours, that insist on so many things. It's easy to feel alone and isolated in an unbelieving society. Our society doesn't hesitate to persecute our beliefs. It doesn't hesitate to mock our positions and hold them against us and pressure us and our children to live lives of sin and unbelief. Often, fellow Christians are too afraid to stand by us when we wish someone would. Too often, people who stood up here when they became members of this congregation and took an oath to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, deny that vow because like Demas, they love the world. They love what they see on TV and on the internet. They love what their friends think more than what God says.

My friends, can the church survive? Yes. It can. Because God is still with us. God is greater than all the powers of hell. God is greater than the world with all its temptations. He will stand by us and work through us to proclaim his gospel so that his message goes forth, no matter how hard the devil tries to stop it. How will he give us the strength to proclaim it? Through that very gospel message.

Our weakness, our fear, our failure is all sin. We should all be better witnesses of the truth. It's our nature to love the world around us and to think that if we have to compromise our testimony to Jesus just a little bit to be popular with unbelievers, God will understand that. We sinners deserve nothing but death and hell from God. But Christ came to pay even for our failures to live up to our calling. Christ came because we're too weak and too afraid to be faithful on our own. Christ came and paid for all that sin. God has wiped it all away. Now, God calls us his beloved children. Every time he says that to us, he strengthens us. Through that Gospel promise, God overcomes all that the devil does in our hearts and he opens our mouths to speak. When we proclaim the gospel, Satan's kingdom falls.

II.

You and I are God's chosen witnesses of the gospel in this world. The devil wants to keep that gospel from being proclaimed and he has enormous power here because sin rules in this world. This life is never going to be perfect. No matter how hard we work, no matter how much effort we put into raising our kids, no matter who we elect as president, evil is always going hurt us here. We can't change that. But God can overcome it. **How does God overcome evil? By rescuing us from every evil attack.**

That's the promise Paul was clinging to. He said that God rescued him from the lion's mouth at his first hearing. Probably, Paul was not thinking of being thrown to the lions in the arena. This is a little too early in the church's history for that. More likely, Paul was thinking of Daniel, and how God rescued him in the lions' den. God spared Paul from being executed. He went on to say, **“The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.”** Paul trusted in God to take care of him. He said that even though he also said that he was about to die for the faith.

How can we die for the faith and still be rescued? Paul is talking about going home to heaven. He trusted God to bring him safely to his heavenly kingdom. The Greek literally says, "God will save me to his heavenly kingdom." Paul had the same faith that you and I have, the faith that we are going home when this life ends. Many times in my ministry, I've had the privilege of standing next to the bed of a dying Christian and assuring them that they were going home. God was taking them to heaven.

That is the greatest rescue of all. We all depend on first responders to rescue us. We depend on firemen and paramedics and police officers. But they can only do so much. I remember an elderly man in my last congregation who had heart attack. The paramedics came and shocked him over and over again and finally, they restarted his heart and took him to the hospital. But he never woke up. After all their faithful work, he still died. Our true rescue isn't here. It's not going to the hospital and then coming home. Our true rescue is being freed from all the sin and hardship of this life and going home to heaven. There, we will never suffer again. There, our hearts will be perfect, so our joy in the Lord will be perfect. There, we will see Jesus face to face.

Now, does that mean that God does nothing for us here? Of course not! More times than we can count, God rescues us from the lion's mouth. Every time we have a near miss on the highway, God rescues us. Every time we could suffer more for our faith, but God doesn't let it happen, he rescues us. Most of us can tell stories of times when we thought we were going to suffer, but God didn't let it happen. Who knows how many times God has rescued us from sin and evil and the devil without us even being aware of what he had done?

But all those rescues in this life are just the foretaste of the one great rescue which is still coming. We are going to be with Jesus forever. That's the gospel promise. That is what we're celebrating in the Lutheran Reformation. The devil doesn't want anyone to be rescued. But God continues to send the gospel out to do that rescuing. God continues to triumph over the powers of the devil so that we hear and believe his promise.

The truth is, we're standing at the end of a long line of confessors, of Christians. In every age, the devil does all that he can to keep our message from being proclaimed. In every age, God overcomes him. St. Paul was killed, but only after he stood up for the truth. 1500 years later, Martin Luther stood up for the truth. The gospel had been all but hidden. People thought they had to earn their way to heaven. They were enslaved to works and indulgences and popery and the consciences were oppressed. But God set Luther free when he rediscovered that eternal life is a gift God gives. Then God strengthened him to preach and teach and his message – the ancient message of Christ crucified – changed Luther's world. It set countless consciences free. It brought untold numbers of people home to heaven. Over and over again, during his lifetime, it looked like that message would be stamped out. Luther was dragged before emperors and princes and ordered to recant. He was condemned to death and excommunicated from the church. Yet, God delivered him from the lion's mouth so that he could continue to preach the gospel, fully and clearly. After he died, the process continued. The devil attacked and God overcame. Right down to today. As long as we live in this world, the devil will never stop trying to stamp out the gospel. But, my friends, God is with us. The gospel is his power. It will overcome all obstacles. It will give us the strength to stand up for the truth and proclaim God's message fully. The church will do his work until the world ends and Jesus returns. Amen.