



Sieze it AND hold it fast!

LUTHER DESCRIBED THE COURSE OF THE GOSPEL as a “passing rain shower.” He says this in the treatise, “To the Counsellors of all Cities of the German lands, that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” (1524; WA 15:27–53; LW 45:352). The parts in italics below are from a single paragraph of the treatise.

Let us remember our former misery, and the darkness in which we dwelt. Germany, I am sure, has never before heard so much of God's Word as it is hearing today; certainly we read nothing of it in history. If we let it just slip by without thanks and honor, I fear we shall suffer a still more dreadful darkness and plague. O my beloved Germans, buy while the market is at your door; gather in the harvest while there is sunshine and fair weather; make use of God's grace and Word while it is there! For you should know that God's Word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been. It has been with the Jews, but when it's gone, it's gone, and now they have nothing. Paul brought it to the Greeks; but again when it's gone, it's gone, and now they have the Turk. Rome and the Latins also had it; but when it's gone, it's gone, and now they have the pope. And you Germans need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay. Therefore, seize it and hold it fast, whoever can, for lazy hands are bound to have a lean year.

“Let us remember our former misery.” Luther refers to the miserable state of affairs under medieval Roman Catholicism. It had covered and obscured the blessed Gospel of

the free forgiveness of all sins in the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus, delivered in the blessed Word of God spoken and the Word in the waters of Baptism and in the Sacrament of the Altar. Church practices at the time focused Christians on deeds they must perform to earn merit, rather than on the deeds of Christ to achieve complete justification and forgiveness (ROM. 3:21–27). Luther and the Reformation completely restored the trajectory of the church from man's action toward God, to God's action in Christ toward man.

“Germany, I am sure, has never before heard so much of God's Word as it is hearing today; certainly we read nothing of it in history.” And it was true. For a few decades, not only in Germany but in much of Europe, the pressing question in all of society was: “How do I know I have a gracious God?” Kings, princes, universities, scholars and common people all wrestled with this question, and many found the clear answer in God's Word.

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Already in 1524, Luther was worried. He was often disappointed with the lives of the people in Wittenberg to whom he preached and to whom he taught the Bible. In 1522 when he came out of hiding at the Wartburg Castle, he was confounded by the mess that the Zwickau Prophets stirred up in Wittenberg. They asserted that the truth of God is not found in Holy Scripture but in ecstatic personal revelations from God. In response, the people had ransacked the churches, pulled down the crucifixes, mistreated common and weak Christians, and treated each other horribly. “You know the

doctrine," Luther preached in frustration. "I've been preaching it to you for years! And now you are living like swine and abusing each other." He preached with the words of St. Paul, "Shall we sin that grace may abound? By no means!"

"If we let it just slip by without thanks and honor, I fear we shall suffer a still more dreadful darkness and plague." When the blessed Savior and His Gospel are met with indifference, without thankfulness and honor, things are bound to go poorly with a people.

"O my beloved Germans, buy while the market is at your door; gather in the harvest while there is sunshine and fair weather; make use of God's grace and Word while it is there!" Luther references Isaiah: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (ISAIAH 55:1). The Gospel is free. Take it. Receive it while it's here because it won't last.

"For you should know that God's Word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been." The Gospel is like a summer rain that comes heavy and briefly. It pours cats and dogs, then it ceases as quickly as it came and passes on to another place. History shows it's so. Elsewhere, Luther says it comes for but a few generations, or perhaps the life of a man, and then it's gone. It passes from a people for thanklessness.

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and now they have the pope. And you Germans need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay."

Luther was right. The Jews and Greeks, the Romans and the Latins all had Christ, but now they have lost Him. The darkness Luther witnessed still reigns in the Roman Catholic Church. I've seen it with my own eyes in Rome, where Roman Catholics can purchase indulgences for this pious activity, proceeding through that church door, climbing these stairs or viewing that alleged relic.

And what happened in Germany? In the early 20th century, Nazism claimed the hearts of Germans. Sasse notes that it was the grandchildren of the great men of the Lutheran revival in the 19th century that became Nazis. Today, barely any Lutherans remain in what was formerly East Germany, and those who treasure the Gospel are a tiny minority in state churches that have substituted God's clear and inerrant Word with social justice and environmentalism.

In America, once the greatest source for world mission and Christian education, the rain shower seems to be passing quickly. It's raining in Africa. It's raining in Germany again among Muslims who are becoming Christians.

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What about us? What about the LCMS? Does "ingratitude and contempt" exist among us?

Sadly, yes. Do we know the simple teaching of the Small Catechism? Does the Small Catechism play a significant role in our congregations?

Are we teaching the Bible? Are we thankful for the teaching of the Gospel and Sacraments? Have we been fooled into thinking that biblical Lutheran teaching is merely a quaint historical relic? Do we love and treasure our pastor and give thanks for him and his faithful and clear delivery of the Word of God?

We have much to give thanks for. In the face of so many challenges, church leaders like me are often tempted by cynicism, which kills thankfulness. Some who reject the clear teachings of Scripture, whether from prideful arrogance or from a bad conscience that wants to pare down God's Law, will answer before the judgment seat of Christ. Some, perhaps many of us, are tempted by thanklessness when we lament that the church is so far from perfect.

We are poor, miserable sinners all. And yet, we are blessed. We are blessed by a true confession of the Scriptures. We are blessed by pastors and teachers who believe the Scriptures. We are blessed by enormous resources. We are blessed by great seminaries. We are blessed by Christian leaders at our Concordia universities. We are blessed by growing parochial schools. And we are blessed with thousands of faithful families who love Jesus. Bottom line: We are blessed to know the Gospel of forgiveness in Jesus.

O Lord, take not Your mercy from us. O Lord, stay with us for it is evening. O Lord, thank You for Your blessings. Let it rain, Lord. Thank You! Keep sending us the showers. O Lord, spare us what we deserve.

The Introit for the Fourth Sunday of Advent prays, "Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness" (ISAIAH 45:8).

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