

Text: 2 Timothy 4:14-18. Reformation Sunday. **November 2, 2014.**

Service introduction: Today we are celebrating the Reformation. Historians ranked the Reformation the second most influential event in the last 1000 years. That's pretty significant. The Reformation is a celebration of God using Martin Luther to reform the church and bring back the teaching of the Bible. The Reformation was really about bringing certainty back to people's troubled consciences, certainty to answer the question, "Am I sure I'm going to be in heaven?"

You will be in heaven. Be sure! Amen.

Are you sure you will be in heaven? I have the privilege to ask many people that question. I get a lot of different answers. But it doesn't matter what answers I've heard or what answers are popular. The only answer that matters is your own, personal answer. Are you sure you will be in heaven? What makes you sure? Or unsure?

Does your situation in life make you sure or unsure? What if this were your situation? You are sitting in prison, and not a minimum security three month summer sentence. You are in a cold dungeon. Hear the water dripping in the dankness? You are facing a life sentence. If you were in prison justly, for murder, would you be unsure? God would never let me into heaven after I did that! If you were in prison unjustly, for something you didn't do, would that make you more unsure? How can God say that he loves me when he is letting me rot in prison? Now consider this. You are in prison for one reason. You are telling people about Jesus. You won't stop telling people about Jesus. You tell people at every chance you get, public or private, "Jesus is risen from the dead. Jesus is the Savior of the world!" And for those wonderful words, you are in a cold, dank dungeon, for life.

Oh, and this is just the icing on the cake. Before getting to this dungeon, you've been brutally whipped, on three different occasions. Been beaten with rods. Once you were stoned and left for dead. But you miraculously survived. Oh, and you once spent a day and a night on the open sea, perilously clinging to a board floating on the water. Think you would ever forget that experience? Would that make you more sure you were going to heaven? "Look at how God delivered me from all these terrible situations." Or would those horrifying experiences make you sure of something else, "God must have forgotten about me!"

And now, you are facing the death penalty. Certain execution. All for preaching the message, "Jesus is the Savior." What would you think? Would you be sure?

And you can never escape the opposition. Alexander is so seared on your mind. The terrible harm he has brought on you. And he's still running around causing problems, so you have to warn your friend Timothy to be on guard against him. Alexander doesn't just make personal attacks. Those I could stand. But he attacks our message. He attacks the good news about Jesus. He strongly opposes, he very violently opposes any message about Jesus. You better watch out for this guy. How does opposition make you feel? More sure? Less sure?

Well, at least I can tolerate opposition if I still have some friends with me. Uh oh. Forgot to mention that all your friends abandoned you, left you in the lurch, have totally forsaken you. When you were on trial, making your defense against these charges that you are a Christian, no one came to court with you. No one stood by your side. No one was there to support you. No one! They all bailed. They all forsook you. They all abandoned you in your hour of greatest need. Maybe now you know a little of what Jesus felt like.

Maybe you can understand why they would bail. Christianity is an outlawed religion. The Christians are being blamed for the burning of the capitol city of Rome. The Christians are being thrown to the lions for the entertainment of the masses. If I show up in a courtroom in support of a Christian, I just might be lion food. Maybe I can help the cause better by just laying low. You think that's how Paul felt when no one stood by his side? You think that's how Jesus felt when everyone abandoned him? Yet Jesus begged forgiveness for those who crucified him. Paul asked that their abandonment not be counted against them. They were weak brothers and sisters in Christ, not openly hostile haters like Alexander.

What would your reaction be, in the cold dungeon, facing execution for preaching the message about Jesus, after all the other junk you've been through, all alone, with every friend bailing on you? Would you start to think, "Does God still love me? Am I still going to heaven?" I don't think it takes prison. Just one Alexander who says, "You go to that strict church that hates women?" And we are ready to throw in the Jesus towel. What happens when you lose one friend at school, because you won't pile on the picking on, lose one boyfriend because you want to wait until marriage? Do you bail on God? And then afterward does the guilt pile up so much you have only one answer? I am sure I'm not going to heaven. God couldn't love me any more. Where do I go? Where can I turn? How can I be sure?

The Lord. The Lord. The Lord. This is Paul's refrain. Make it yours. The Lord. The Lord. The Lord. The Lord stands by my side. He reaches out his nail pierced hands to wipe away my tears of guilt and says, "I will always love you. Always." He holds his cross before your eyes and says, "I put my blood on these boards. That's how valuable you are to me." He walks me to his empty tomb and says,

"Your grave will be empty, too. Your mansion in heaven awaits." Look to the Lord to be certain. Look to the Lord Jesus to be sure. If you just look at your circumstances, the garbage of life, the suffering and loss you experience, even your own efforts to make everything right, you will never be sure, always falling short. But look to Jesus. He will give you certainty. Look at the cross. There you find your forgiveness, sealed with blood. Look to the empty tomb. Leave your doubts there. Walk away saying, "I am sure. I am sure. I am sure. I will be in heaven because of my Lord, my Savior, Jesus."

The calm confidence of Paul is amazing. The Lord will repay Alexander for what he has done. I don't need to take revenge. I don't need to focus on Alexander. I need to focus on Jesus. I need to leave Alexander's sins on the cross as much as I have left my own sins on the cross. The Lord will deal with Alexander's sins as surely as the Lord dealt with my sins. The Lord can give Alexander what he has coming way better than I can. I'll let the Lord take care of Alexander.

The Lord will always stand by my side. Always. Always. When friends desert me, the Lord will not. If I lose 19 boyfriends, I will still have the best friend, Jesus. Jesus is the one eternal friend. Jesus won't abandon me, forsake me, leave me in the lurch. Jesus will take me to heaven. I'm sure of that. In my hour of greatest need, Jesus will be there, right by my side. Even if I can't count on any friend or any family, I can always count on Jesus. He will be by my side.

The Lord will give me strength. Strength. How easily don't we say, "It's too hard." But later we realize, "I'm too soft." The problem isn't the problem, the problem is I haven't looked to Jesus for strength to deal with this problem. Paul found strength in prison, in this cold dark dungeon, this death sentence for preaching about Jesus. I don't think any of us have yet faced that kind of a problem and likely never will. If there is strength in Jesus to face a death sentence for being a Christian, there is strength in Jesus for every other problem as well.

Even in the biggest problems there is a purpose. The Lord gave me strength so that through me the message, there's that word again, the message, Paul's concern was always for the message, the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. If I have to go to prison one hundred times so more people can hear the message, lock me up. If I have to spend one thousand life sentences so the Gentiles can hear this precious Gospel, one thousand life sentences won't be enough. I want everyone to hear the message. I want all people to know the Lord. And I don't care what I have to suffer. I am sure I'm going to heaven. Nothing can change that. I want everyone else to be in heaven. Nothing can change that. I want everyone to be sure. Nothing can change that.

And I can look back. The Lord has rescued me in the past. He will rescue me in the future. I survived those whippings. They didn't take away my heaven. The Lord rescued me in the open sea. In fact, everyone on the ship survived the shipwreck. The Lord will certainly rescue me from this earth and take me to heaven. The Lord rescued me from the lion's mouth. Now, we have to be honest we can't say for sure what this is. Maybe it was a literal lion. Unlikely. Maybe it was a reference to the Roman emperor at the time, Nero, who was famous for feeding Christians to the lions. But Paul was a Roman citizen. He wouldn't face the lions. Maybe it's just a vivid way to say, "The Lord has rescued me from certain death many times. I'm not afraid of dying."

The Lord. That's what makes us certain. The Lord. He makes us sure. The Lord will repay. The Lord stood by my side. The Lord strengthened me. The Lord delivered me. All these wonderful words. But we haven't gotten to the best one yet. The Lord will save me for his heavenly kingdom. We don't think about heaven nearly enough. We could talk about heaven 100 times more than we do and it wouldn't be enough. Heaven is being with God. Heaven is being free from all sorrow and suffering and sadness and pain. Heaven is perfection. Heaven is the strength to keep going. Heaven. The Lord will take you there. Heaven. It never ends. Heaven.

Paul could handle being in prison. He was going to heaven. Paul could handle beatings and whippings. He was going to heaven. And he was sure. Desertion? Loneliness? I'm going to heaven. Devil, is that all you got? Bother someone else. I'm going to heaven. I am saved eternally. Yes, I am sure. No matter what. Yes, I am sure I'm going to heaven. Yes, I am sure. I am sure. I am sure. I am sure. Amen.