

I KINGS 20:26-30

FEAR NOT, LITTLE FLOCK !

So it was, in the spring of the year, that Ben-Hadad mustered the Syrians and went up to Aphek to fight against Israel. And the children of Israel were mustered and given provisions, and they went against them. Now the children of Israel encamped before them like two little flocks of goats, while the Syrians filled the countryside.

Then a man of God came and spoke to the king of Israel and said, thus says the LORD: "Because the Syrians have said, The LORD is God of the hills, but He is not God of the valleys; therefore I will deliver all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the LORD."

And they encamped opposite each other for seven days. So it was that on the seventh day the battle was joined; and the children of Israel killed 100,000 foot soldiers of the Syrians in one day. But the rest fled to Aphek, into the city; then a wall fell on 27,000 of the men who were left. And Ben-Hadad fled and went into the city, into an inner chamber.

"Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." These are words from Jesus (Luke 12:32). Although the words were spoken to His disciples, they are words for us, and also apply to the Old Testament text before us. The text is from the time of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, idol-worshipping rulers of the 10 tribes of Jacob with the name Israel. (The other 2 tribes and their king were called Judah). Because of Israel's waywardness, the Lord allowed Israel to be oppressed by neighboring Syria and King Benhadad. A year earlier, Israel's small army of 7000 had defeated the massive army of Syria. A miracle! The Lord was still rescuing and reaching out to Israel, calling them to repentance. Now, a year later, Syria approached again with another like-sized army. This time they decided to fight on the plains, not in the hills as the previous time, for they concluded Israel's God was a god of the hills but not of the plains. Syria's army approached and filled the land with its encampment. Israel's small army, as our text says, looked like *two little flocks of goats camped before them*. Again the Lord gave Israel the victory! 100,000 Syrians were killed. Those who escaped fled to Aphek, where 27,000 died when the city wall collapsed on them. Enemy King Benhadad scurried to hide within the city! "Fear not little flock!" says the Lord to His people.

That scenario of the godless vs. the believers has been repeated throughout the history. Massive numbers of idol-worshipping unbelievers, prompted by Satan, have sought to squelch the seemingly helpless people of God who cling by faith to God's promise of righteousness and rescue through Jesus His Son, our only Savior from sin. In the Old Testament, idol-worshipping Egypt and its Pharaoh, the Philistines, Midianites, here Syria, Assyria, Babylon were seeking to destroy the people of God. In the New Testament, the unbelieving Jews crucified Jesus and persecuted His followers; idol worshipping Rome and the Caesars soon followed. To this day **Satan** still seeks to thwart the Message of Jesus. He wants you to slide God out, or at least into the tiniest corner, of your hear, and to buy into his "deal" and all that he *seems* to offer (*seems* is the main word). Believers, that is, members of the Invisible Christian Church, have long been a small band under attack in this world. The Truth, for which they stand, is "salvation in Christ"—*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except by Me* (John 14:6). God's Truth embitters Satan, who wants to keep all the children of Adam and Eve, trapped in sin. He wants to root out salvation in Christ. Beware! And "Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour" (I Peter 5:9). A roaring, devouring lion! Not a cute little pet to keep around, who makes you only happy. He is clever and persuasive. Against him you have no more power than two little flocks of goats before Syria's army. But God gives you the victory in Christ!—forgiveness, resurrection, and a holy life forever !

Today is Reformation Sunday. We look back at the Middle Ages and see the same lopsided alignment of Satan's forces vs. the Children of God in Christ. ---- By the 1500's Satan had led Christianity to grown stale in the hearts of believers. The church began to replace Christ with itself! Being a Christian had become a system of outward life and a mouth-only confession. The heart was left far behind. Martin Luther was born into such a world in 1483 in Germany. By the grace of God Martin Luther was led to see from the Bible that acceptance before God could not be achieved by an individual's efforts, but by faith in Christ alone. Jesus had not come to earth to set the example on how to save self. (Often Jesus is thought of that way—the teacher, the example, the show-you-how-to-do-it guy.) Jesus was the sacrifice, the-sacrifice-to-the-point-of-death, for every man's sins! In His life, death, and resurrection there is acceptance before God for you—by faith. Satan wanted, and wants, such a message stopped. Martin Luther was merely a band of helpless goats before the forces of Satan.

Who were Luthé's foes? The church (visible church) of the day—the **Roman Church**. The Roman church did not want him preaching forgiveness in Christ, which would detract from the papacy and his supposed control over salvation. It would detract from the Roman system of cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and priests, who had received from the pope authority “to re-offer” Christ-for-sin in the sacrifice of the Mass (Communion). Faith in Christ alone would detract from prayers to saints, years in purgatory, penance performed after confession to guarantee forgiveness, indulgences purchased to shorten the stay in purgatory. And Rome's power to enforce its claims was excommunication—declaring someone an unbeliever and outside of the realm of salvation. The same ideas persist. Luther was excommunicated.

Any visible church, which strays from God's Word and teaches contrary to God's Scripture, opposes The Invisible Church. If we seek the prosperity of our own congregation or our synod by teaching other than the Truth of Christ as drawn from God's Word, then we lining up with Satan.

Civil government also opposed Luther. In the eyes of civil government Luther was nothing but a small flock to be extinguished at will. The chief authority of day was Emperor Charles V who ruled Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and more. He was deeply loyal to the church of Rome. To end the religious turmoil in his land, a special meeting at Worms, Germany. There Luther was asked to take back, that is recant, his written works. He refused. The emperor declared him an outlaw, wanted dead or alive! Under God's hand Luther's territorial prince kept him safe at the Wartburg castle. “Fear not, little flock!” ----- Today one can also see how civil government, gone awry, works as the devil's tool against the preaching of the Gospel and all the accompanying Truths of Christ.

There was **Ulrich Zwingli** of Switzerland, another reformer with similar positions to Luther. Imagine the “draw” it was for Luther to join forces with Zwingli (later John Calvin) and make a massive reform movement! However, they did not agree on all points. Zwingli saw the Lord's Supper as an act by which believer displays his loyalty to Christ. Luther saw the Lord's Supper as an act by which Christ comes to believers to comfort their hearts with forgiveness. As the Bible says, “This is My body. . . this is My blood . . . for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:26-30) What a temptation to join hands to make Luther's efforts greater. Why remain just two small bands of goats? But there was no compromise on Scripture! ----- The devil today still tries to draw faithful adherents to the Word into compromise with those who agree on some things, but not all things. If it is not Truth, it is not Truth. Both can't be right. Beware, lest numbers and size become more important than Truth!

There was also **Andreas Carlstadt**, faculty member with Luther at the University of Wittenberg. He was an “action” man, not patient to instruct people. He pushed ahead quickly to get rid of anything that was not necessary—whether it contradicted the Bible or not. Such unbridled zeal and action always steamrollers over those not convinced. The devil knows too much too fast will unravel the whole thing—his goal! The Lord helped Luther show Carlstadt the door; though lost an ally. The same is true today. Change in the church without reasons is just change for change. No matter how great, change needs to be pursued judiciously and with patient instruction of the people.

There were the **Zwickau Prophets**, also reformers, who maintained that they did not need to rely on the Word, because the Holy Spirit spoke to them directly. They operated with much emotionalism. Luther called them Schwaermer, or Enthusiasts. To build faith on emotions and feelings, rather than facts and truths of Scripture, is always a danger. It may get people into church, but “church” is not about an emotional “high.” The high will dwindle when life goes sour. Faith is built up by steady spiritual instruction in the facts that Jesus loves the sinner. He died and rose for sinners. You are safe and saved on the basis of the facts of Scripture, not a temporary feeling. Walk away from emotionalism.

There was the **Peasants Revolt**. Many rural serfs and peasants felt that the reform that Luther was bringing meant that they were free, not just from the religious rule of Rome; but from civic the rule of the nobles, dukes, and princes as well. What an opportunity for Luther to become popular with masses! However, Scripture declares obedience to the government. Luther let them walk away. Popularity with the masses is not the goal of the church.

There was **Luther's own sinful flesh**. He was not always the most gentle in speech. At times He suffered bouts of depression and discouragement—in German *Anfechtung*. He worked long hours with many things on his mind, and age began to wear him down. On his own he was helpless. Every pastor, steered by his own flesh and will, becomes his own worst enemy.

Who can fight all these forces? No one. We are like the two little bands of goats facing the masses of Syria. But **Jesus carries the day** for each and for all in the Invisible Church of God. When Peter confessed “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God”; Jesus responded, “Upon this rock I will build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18)! Jesus will preserve those who are His by faith. Whether it was Israel, or Luther, or the church today; in Jesus you are never just two little bands. “Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom!”

Amen! So be it!

Pastor Kanzenbach---