

65. EUROPE BEFORE THE REFORMATION

GROWING PROSPERITY

There is a proverb which says: "God's mills grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small."

We often believe God should intervene quicker in the events of this world. If it were up to us, things would happen faster and better. In our folly, we often think that 'God's mills' grind too slow.

This folly shows evidence of our darkened understanding and that we have lost true wisdom. We sometimes think that the Lord isn't getting it right. Little do we realise that the Lord works events according to His perfectly wise plan for this world. If events unfold differently to what we want, we can become impatient, rebellious, or despondent.

And then, just when we think things won't work out anymore, it is often God's time!

His perfectly wise intervention can come from a different direction than we expected. In hindsight, we will humbly need to admit that the Lord does things much better than we ever could and for this, we must praise Him.

During the time of the Middle Ages, the faithful believers struggled with this as well. They were praying and hoping for change, but it was not happening!

Though the mills of
God grind slowly, yet
they grind exceeding
small; Though with
patience He stands
waiting, with
exactness grinds He
all.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

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"The Lord has forgotten us," they thought, and they had almost given up hope. However, without them realising, the Lord was already busy *preparing* the great event of the Reformation.

NEW INVENTIONS

Significant changes *had* already taken place, which would *serve* the Reformation.

Just think of the invention of the printing press,



A rebuilt copy of the printing press invented by the gold smith Johannes Gutenberg in 1440. It had a capacity of 3600 pages a day

which made it possible to spread the written word quickly and effectively.

Just think of the invention of gun powder which changed the way war was waged; wars had a big impact on the spread of the Reformation.

Just think of how nobility was losing its superior role and how the third class, the ordinary citizens, were becoming more powerful and wealthy.

Just think of how farmers were prospering. The recent discovery of America prompted a flourishing trade, creating further wealth for ordinary people.

Just think of the Renaissance: the awakening of arts and science. All these developments created jobs and prosperity for ordinary people.

SPIRITUAL DECLINE AND UNREST

The developing prosperity had made the Roman Catholic Church very wealthy too...most cities had their own churches. These church buildings were



The Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris

beautifully sculptured and decorated with artistic plate glass windows.

From the *outside* things looked prosperous and thriving.

And yet, there was great dissatisfaction among many church members. The outward glamour of the Roman Catholic Church with her ceremonies and traditions no longer satisfied them.

They were disgusted with the offensive lifestyle of the clergy.

They no longer allowed empty pomp and splendour to subdue and fool them. The people desired, at times unconsciously, something different, something more real.

In years gone by, faithful men had tried to change things. You may remember the Waldensians in southern France, who had turned away from the Roman Catholic church and returned to scripture showing in doctrine and life that things must be done differently.

Think of John Wycliffe in England and John Huss in Bohemia, and so many other fore-runners of the Reformation who had warned against the empty Roman traditions. But all those attempts had

seemingly come to nothing. Every time, the response of the Roman clergy had been fierce and violent. Any attempt at reformation had been cruelly suppressed and nipped in the bud. Despite this strong opposition from the Roman clergy, the work of the 'fore-runners' echoed in the hearts of hundreds of thousands of unhappy church members. Again, and again, expectations of reformation were raised only to be dashed when nothing changed. The people had become tired of fighting. It didn't help anyway.

The Roman clergy smirked...

And then ...suddenly ... the Reformation came. Unstoppable!

No one had counted on that anymore, but now it was God's time!

The Roman clergy attempted to ward off the approaching storm.

They reviled and threatened.

They called the Reformation an act of revolution! But the Reformation was no revolution, it was a work of the Lord, and therefore nobody could stop it.

It seemed as if the dream of Nebuchadnezzar was being fulfilled a second time!

Again, a small stone became a large mountain.

The Reformation also began so small, so insignificant, but it grew! This change came at *God's* time, and He makes no mistakes!

In His 'rescue plan' the Lord used men to achieve His goal. Men whom He equips and strengthens to do this beautiful but difficult task. These were men who, in the power and strength of the Lord, stood firm for the truth and did not waver in times of trouble and when facing opposition. With those men, I mean the great Reformers, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin.

However, before I begin telling you about these Reformers, I must first tell you something about the political state in Europe. This story will show you that God came at just the right time; we will discover that although God's mills grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small. (God is very thorough)

About the year 1500, there were three powerful kingdoms in Europe. Spain, with its extensive colonies in South America, was a world power! However, France and England were important and influential, as well. At that time, Germany was divided and weak because it consisted of independent areas called electorates. The rulers of these areas were called electors. Together these electors appointed an emperor who for his decision making was dependant on the support of these electors.

I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying: 'My council shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.' Is 46:10

God chose this weak and divided Germany as the place to start The Reformation. Germany became the focal point of The Reformation.

CHARLES V AND HIS DREAM

In 1519 the German electors chose Charles V as emperor. At the time, Charles was only nineteen years old. The electors chose him, thinking: "Such a young emperor will not have any experience and will need to listen to us. We will tell him what to do, and he won't dare to oppose us."

But they were mistaken! Though Charles V was still quite young, he knew very well what he wanted and refused to be the servant of the bossy electors.

Charles V's dream was to restore the ancient German empire to its previous greatness. This restored empire was to have only *one* religion, which had to be the Roman Catholic religion!

All that religious quarrelling had to *stop!* Charles V was determined to severely punish all those who would not obey the Roman Catholic Church. They had to submit to the Roman Catholic teachings. However, nothing came of the young emperor's ambitious plans because God had determined differently.

God planned to *deliver* His people from Rome's heresies.

The German emperor's dream clashed with God's decree.

True, Charles V became a powerful monarch, but he could not prevail against the mighty King of kings. He had to lose, but he didn't want to yield! Then the Omnipotent One crushed him. The dream of Charles V *had* to fail.

At the age of fifty-five, he abdicated, a broken man. His life's dream ended in a big disappointment. Doesn't the Lord say: "My counsel shall stand?"

Who can persevere and survive in a struggle *against* the most high God?

Charles V was not only emperor of Germany, but he also became king of the mighty world empire of Spain, and lord of the Netherlands.

He was the most powerful monarch of his time.

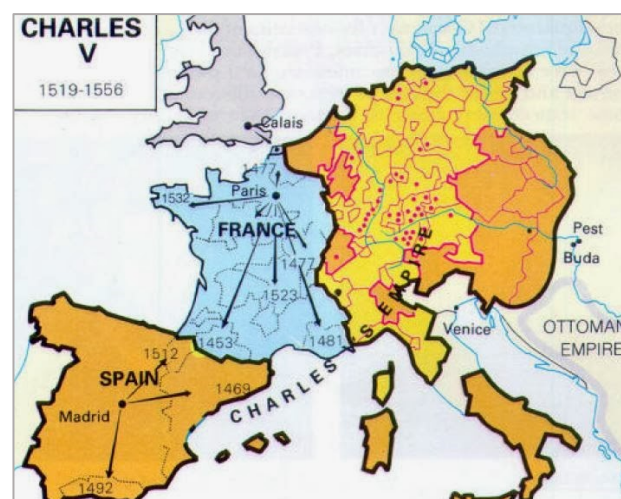
Spain was a strong Catholic country.

France was a strong Catholic country.

If those two countries had become allies, they would have been able to destroy the Reformation and nip its beginnings in the bud.

Then they would ... but ... No!

The Lord directed history in such a way that those two Catholic nations became mortal enemies. In those days King Francis I ruled over France.



Charles V's empire and his wars against France.

Charles V constantly had to wage big battles against that French monarch. Several electors in Germany chose the side of the Reformation; others remained faithful to Rome and supported their emperor. But each time Charles V thought he had time to crush the Reformation, a new war with France broke out.

To fight that war successfully, he needed the support of *all* the electors. However, those electors who had chosen the side of the Reformation, would only support him if the emperor withdrew his opposition to the Reformation!

In that way, those electors repeatedly managed to frustrate the emperor's evil plans. Do you see the hand of God in this?

In addition to the wars with France, Charles V tried to stop the military advance of Muslims (Ottoman Empire) from Turkey into the South of Germany. They managed to invade Charles V territory even as far as Vienna, the capital of Austria.



Charles V 1500-1558

These wars kept Charles V busy for his entire life. The Lord diverted his attention from the Reformation in Germany so that this work could advance unhindered.

This history clearly shows the golden thread of God's reign. The King of kings rules over the earthly kings and emperors. He governs the life of the nations.

When the wars with France and the Muslims finally ended, and Charles V prepared to destroy the Reformation with one blow,...it was too late. But we hope to tell you more about that later. God made all these things work together for the

good of His Church. The powers of hell could not stop the Reformation.

He takes care of His Church.

That's the comfort we may draw from this amazing history.

QUESTIONS

1. Explain the proverb, "God's mills grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small."
2. List the changes which took place near the end of the Middle Ages by explaining the following:
 - a. Methods of extending the written word
 - b. Methods of waging war
 - c. Changing class structure
 - d. Exploration
 - e. Trade
 - f. Art and learning
 - g. Satisfaction with the Church and its wealth
3. Who were the 'instruments' of the Reformation?
4. Name the three most powerful empires in 1500. What was the political situation in Germany?
5. What was Charles V's dream for his new empire?
6. How did God direct matters so that Charles V could not actively prevent the Reformation from gaining ground in Germany?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. The author states that "when we think things won't work out anymore it is often God's time." Show how the time prior to the coming of the Messiah was similar. Find a text to show that that time was also a time of great darkness until the light of the Gospel shone.