God’s Hand in History

God is the Lord of history. He rules all things for the good of his church and the good of his plan of salvation. From the very beginning, he was working in history so that everything was in place for the sending of his Son. He used kings and empires to discipline his people in captivity and demonstrate his faithfulness by returning them to their homeland. A common Greek language allowed for ease of communicating the gospel throughout the Mediterranean world. The Roman Empire brought peace and ensured relatively safe travel on land and sea. The Jewish people living under foreign rule heightened their longing for the Messiah. God used Caesar’s edict to force Mary and Joseph to move to Bethlehem at just the right time (Galatians 4:4). Even the Roman method of execution fit God’s plan to have the Savior “pierced for our transgressions” (Isaiah 53:5).

When we look at the Lutheran Reformation, we can see God’s hand in history. Luther was not the first to attempt to reform the church. So why was he successful? Why did he survive when others were executed as heretics? The major reason was that Luther’s reformation was theological. Luther focused on what the church was teaching. The Holy Spirit worked through the gospel that Luther was preaching, teaching, and writing to bring countless people to faith in Christ alone as their Savior. However, we can also point to several historical factors that were in place that allowed Luther to survive and succeed.

Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press in the mid-15th century. Prior to the printing press, copies of written material had to be made by hand, a painstaking and expensive process. With the invention of the printing press, books and pamphlets could be reproduced efficiently, inexpensively, and in mass quantities. This also fostered an increased interest in literacy. Luther took advantage of this new technology to get his message to a broad audience. He became the best-selling author of the 16th century. Since Luther believed that the gospel was the power of God to change hearts and lives (Romans 1:16), he wanted that gospel as accessible as possible.

Luther was a citizen of Saxony, one of the hundreds of principalities that made up the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. By God’s working and timing, Luther’s princes, Frederick the Wise, John the Steadfast, and John Frederick the Magnanimous, served as Luther’s protectors and supporters. The government of the Holy Roman Empire allowed for these princes to have sufficient authority and power to keep Luther safe and alive.

The Lord of history raised up enemies of the Catholic Holy Roman Emperor Charles V to keep him distracted. He needed the help of the German princes to battle the French, the pope, and the Muslim Turks. He had to make concessions to the Lutheran princes. And he was unable to devote all of his energies and focus on getting rid of Luther. This allowed time for Lutheran teaching to spread and solidify.

We know that Jesus rules all things for the good of his church. Everything is in his control (Ephesians 1:20-23). God has his hand in history. That includes your history. He has worked in your life so that, in ways that are different for different people, he has brought you into contact with the gospel. Maybe you had Christian parents who had you baptized and taught you about Jesus. Perhaps it was meeting your future spouse who brought you to a Bible information class. Whatever it might have been, God’s hand is still in history for the good of his church—and for your spiritual and eternal good.