

MARTIN LUTHER: *Lifting the Veil and Preaching the Truth*

I. Luther's Day: Times were a Changing

Luther grew up in one of the greatest periods of change and discovery in all of world history. He was born in 1483, just nine years before Columbus discovered the 'New World.' Indeed, exploration of the entire globe was finally taking place, new lands were discovered, Magellan circled the globe, the printing press was invented, wars raged over land and gold, and the Renaissance broke out all over Europe. Into these tumultuous times was born a man destined to create more chaos: Martin Luther. When Luther attacked the church, the pope wrote that "a wild boar is in the vineyard."

Luther's father, Hans, was a peasant copper miner who managed to climb the middle class ladder and become an entrepreneur. His motto was, "a free peasant is nobody's slave." Hans desperately wanted Luther to become a lawyer where he could further climb the social ladder and provide for his entire family. Though Luther got a bachelors and masters degree in law, he never became a lawyer.

II. Caught in a Storm

While walking home one day, a fierce storm arose which, at least in his view, threatened to kill him. He was so afraid he cried out, "Help me St. Anne! I will become a monk!" Within two weeks Luther was knocking on the door of the order of Augustinian monks and joining the cloister, which required him to donate every possession to charity, including the very expensive legal text his father had recently gifted him. His father was furious, and he boldly accused his son of breaking the command to honor his father by entering the monastery.

III. The First Major Turning Point: Entering the Monastery

Luther later wrote that his decision to enter the monastery was a flagrant sin, "not worth a farthing" because he made the decision out of fear and against his father. But he then wrote, "But how much good the merciful Lord has allowed to come of it!"

"In the monastery, I did not think about women, money, or possessions; instead my heart trembled and fidgeted about whether God would bestow his grace on me...For I had strayed from faith and could not but imagine that I had angered God, whom I in turn had to appease by doing good works. If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy."

Luther was one of the greatest and most impeccable monks ever to enter a monastery. According to one historian, "he did not simply engage in prayer, fasts, and ascetic practices (such as going without sleep, enduring bone-chilling cold without a blanket, and flagellating himself), he pursued them earnestly. As he later commented, 'If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I.'" Like Paul in Philippians. 3, Luther could not be satisfied that such practices could make him righteous enough for God. He redoubled his efforts but it was not enough.

IV. The Second Major Turning Point: A Trip to Rome

Luther's mentor, Johannes Staupitz hoped that one way Luther would be comforted and driven from his endless self-examination and fear of God would be a trip to the holy city, Rome. Once there however, Luther recoiled at the sight of abuses, immorality, and blasphemy that existed not only among the people but among the priests. But Luther, still struggling for peace of conscience persisted in his quest at the *Scala Sancta*. These were supposedly the steps leading to Pilate's chambers where Jesus Himself once stood condemned. The church taught that if you dragged yourself up the stairs, on each one saying an our Father, you could take years off your (or your relatives') time in purgatory. Luther performed this ritual but when he finally reached the

summit, he stood and asked, “Who knows whether it is true?” Luther knew that there was more and somehow less to forgiveness than this.

V. The Third Major Turning Point: Opening the Bible

After teaching philosophy in the monastery for several years, Luther earned his doctorate (1512) and was given the chance to finally teach Scripture. Having been captivated by Jesus’ quote of Psalm 22.1, ‘My Lord, my Lord, why have you forsaken me,’ Luther began with the Psalms in 1513. He lectured on the Psalms for a year and a half and then took up the book of Romans for the next year and a half.

“I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was...a single word in 1.17, ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed,’ that had stood in my way. For I hated that word ‘righteousness of God.’ Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words. There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.”

“The Bible is a remarkable fountain: the more one draws and drinks of it, the more it stimulates thirst.”

“God wants to give you His Spirit only through the external Word.”

In 1526, Luther decided to lecture on Ecclesiastes. In difficult preparation he wrote to a friend, “Solomon the preacher is giving me a hard time, as though he begrudged anyone lecturing on him. But he must yield.”

VI. The Fourth Major Turning Point: The Pope Builds a Church

Pope Leo X was intent on constructing a new Cathedral in Rome, St. Peter’s. His love of art had already bankrupted the Vatican treasury but he still refused to spare any expense in the construction of this new church, thus the hiring of Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of its chapel. Since the church was nearly out of money, they decided to sell indulgences, an official papal declaration of forgiveness for self or relatives. One of the primary hawkers of such wares was John Tetzel who came to Luther’s hometown offering theses indulgences to his parishioners. His famous sales pitch was, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” When the building of that church met with the new found faith of Luther, what resulted was a demand for debate in the form of 95 theses.

VII. The Fifth Major Turning Point: Luther Excommunicated

Initially, Luther only challenged the *practices* of the church but now he would begin to challenge her *authority*. When he was condemned a heretic by the church he responded by doing a crazy thing—he demanded proof of his heresy from Scripture. The only reason such a demand may seem commonsense to us is because of Luther. The church refused to debate him on Scripture, referring only to tradition and canon law. Since Luther would not recant the pope had his books burned and issued an official *bull* (edict) that he would be officially excommunicated if he did not recant within 60 days. At the end of this grace period, Luther walked into the streets of Wittenberg, piled up the church’s canon law and the papal bull and lit them afire.

VIII. The Sixth Major Turning Point: Luther Called to Account

Because of his supposed heresy, Luther was called to appear before Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, at the Diet (Assembly) of Worms. Here, at last, he hoped for a debate but the only debate the church would entertain was whether or not he would recant. Luther, unprepared for such chicanery and knowing his very life was at stake, took a day to think it over. When he returned, he issued one of the most famous of the

reformation statements: “Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason, I cannot and I will not recant for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.

IX. Luther’s Work Amid Suffering

Luther certainly exercised his pen during his time, preaching over 3,000 times and writing 60,000 pages. The English edition of his works is 55 volumes and still doesn’t include all that he wrote. In the year that his daughter Elizabeth died (at 8 months old), Luther had one of his busiest years, preaching 200 times. From 1526-1531 Luther spent almost 30 months sick with kidney stones, gall stones, headaches, insomnia, nightmares, severe inner ear pain, depression, colds, and dizzy spells. Though the plague struck (1527) and his daughter died (1528), Luther managed during this 5 year period to preach over 700 times, lecture almost daily in the university, write over 100 publications, all in addition to the nearly 700 letters he wrote.

When Elizabeth died, Luther wrote, “I so lamented her death that I was exquisitely sick, my heart rendered soft and weak; never had I thought that a father’s heart could be so broken for his children’s sake.” When Magdalena died at age 13, the pain nearly killed him. He wished he could give thanks for her entry into heaven but he confessed, “The force of our natural love is so great that we are unable to do this without crying and grieving in our hearts and experiencing death ourselves. The features, the words, and the movement of our living and dying daughter, who was so very obedient and respectful, remain engraved in our hearts; even the death of Christ is unable to take all this away as it should. Please give thanks to God in our stead.”

Luther suffered from excruciating kidney stones and headaches, with buzzing in his ears and ear infections and incapacitating constipation and hemorrhoids. He said, “I nearly gave up the ghost—and now, bathed in blood, can find no peace. What took four days to heal immediately tears open again.”

On August 2, 1527 Luther wrote, “For more than a week I have been thrown back and forth in death and Hell; my whole body feels beaten, my limbs are still trembling. I almost lost Christ completely, driven about on the waves and storms of despair and blasphemy against God. But because of the intercession of the faithful, God began to take mercy on me and tore my soul from the depths of Hell.”

“I want you to know how to study theology in the right way. I have practiced this method myself...Here you will find three rules. They are frequently proposed throughout Psalm 119 and run thus: *Oratio, meditatio, tentatio* (prayer, meditation, tribulation).” These rules teach you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s word is: it is wisdom supreme.”

“If I could today become king or emperor, I would not give up my office as preacher.”

“To curse for the sake of God’s Word is just.”

X. The Legacy of Martin Luther

- Recovery of the Gospel
- Authority of Scripture as well as its translation
- Priesthood of all believers
- Reformed view of Sex and Marriage
- Music returned to worship
- Christian Vocation