

Martin Luther – German Reformer

His Early Life:

- 1) Martin Luther (“Luder” was his actual surname) was born on November 10, 1483 in Eisleben, Germany to Hans and Margarethe Luder. The year following Luther’s birth, his father moved the family to Mansfeld, Germany with the intent of trying to improve their financial situation by going to work in the copper mines that were there. He soon became very successful and became owner of one of the mines.
- 2) Initially Martin was enrolled in a Latin school in Mansfeld, and then in 1497 was sent to a boarding school in Magdenburg. In 1498 he was sent to Eisenach to live with relatives and was educated at the town’s parish school. Luther was described as being a very quiet and reserved, yet a talented student.
- 3) Having risen from peasantry, Martin’s father was determined that his son would be successful, and so at the age of 17, he was enrolled at the University of Erfurt in the year 1501. Luther received his Bachelor’s Degree after just one year of study, and three years later in 1505 completed his Master’s Degree. Martin then enrolled in the law school of that same university with the intention of becoming a lawyer.
- 4) All of those plans dramatically changed just as he was preparing to begin law school. On July 2, 1505 while caught in a terrible thunderstorm, a bolt of lightning struck very near to him. Terrified, he cried out, “Help, St. Anne! I’ll become a monk!” As the storm passed and his life being spared, he kept his end of the bargain, dropping out of law school and entering the Mendicant order of Augustinian monks in Erfurt, much to the surprise of his friends and displeasure of his father.
- 5) The young Martin Luther dedicated himself fully to monastic life, getting up every morning at 3:00 am for his first of many hourly prayers, devoting himself to doing good works, fasting, physically abusing himself, and constant confession of sins. Yet despite all of this, the peace of God escaped him. It seemed that the more that he tried to do for God, the more he was made aware of his own sinfulness.
- 6) After awhile, Luther’s superior, Johann von Staupitz, being concerned for the wellbeing of Luther, had him return to the university to pursue an academic career. Thus in 1507 Luther was ordained to the priesthood and began to study theology at the University of Erfurt. On March 9, 1508 he received a Bachelor’s Degree in Biblical Studies and in the same year began to teach theology at the University of Wittenberg. On October 9, 1512, the university conferred upon Luther the degree of Doctor of Theology. In the year 1515 Luther began to preach in the parish church at Wittenberg.

His Conversion:

- 1) The demands of study for both his academic degrees as well as preparing lectures and sermons, drove him deeply into the scriptures. As theology professor he was assigned to deliver lectures on the Psalms (1514-1515), Romans (1515-1516), Galatians (1516-1517) and Hebrews (1517-1518). During this time of intense study of these books, Luther wrestled with important theological issues, the most important being how it is that a man might be made right with God. It was while studying the book of Romans and especially the text found in Romans 1:17, that says, “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith”, that he came to understand that a man is justified by grace through faith, and not by works.
- 2) Regarding the effect of this text upon Luther’s heart and life, he said, “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scripture from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God”. Thus that place in Paul was truly for me the gate to paradise.”
- 3) Luther thus came to believe and teach that salvation is a gift of God’s grace, received by faith and trust in God’s promise to forgive sins for the sake of Christ’s death on the cross. He believed that this was God’s work from beginning to end.

The 95 Theses:

- 1) The people of Wittenberg loved to hear Luther speak because they had never heard anyone before expound the Scriptures as he did. As time went along, the more Luther studied the Word of God, the more convinced he became of the errors and deceitful practices of the church. Consequently it would not be long before circumstances would force Luther to speak out against them.
- 2) The two issues that caused Luther to begin to publicly speak out against the Church of Rome had to do with the sale of indulgences to pay for the rebuilding of St Peter's Cathedral at Rome and the appointment of Albert of the House of Hohenzollern to two archbishoprics and a bishopric by paying a huge sum of money to the Pope. To promote the sale of indulgences, a monk from Leipzig named Tetzel, toured Germany and the price of them was based on social rank and the severity of sins that had been committed by the purchaser. Some Germans even bought indulgences for sins that they had not even yet committed. People were told that they could even make payments for loved ones who had died to release them from purgatory. Tetzel told the Germans, "The moment the money tinkles in my box, that moment the soul springs out of purgatory." Rome also allowed Albert to employ Tetzel as a chief agent to sell indulgences so that he might be able to repay the money that was borrowed to effect his appointment to the high offices in the church.
- 3) Luther preached vehemently against Tetzel and the sale of indulgences, and became even more outspoken as he saw that men in general had no conscience with regard to their purchase. Thus he wrote 95 theses, plainly stating the evil of indulgences, and on October 31, 1517 at noon, nailed them to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg. The theses attracted a great deal of public attention and were copied and distributed all over Germany and throughout Europe.
- 4) Initially, the Pope paid little regard to the actions of Luther, but soon took the matter very seriously as he began to see the widespread popularity of Luther's position and that it represented a direct threat to his authority as Pope and to the doctrine of the Church. Thus the Pope demanded Luther recant and summoned him to appear in Rome. The Pope also demanded that Frederick 111, Elector of Saxony (Frederick the Wise) deliver up this "child of the devil" to the papal representative. Frederick persuaded the pope to send a delegation instead before whom Luther might appear. Cardinal Cajetan was sent and after demanding that Luther retract his errors, Luther replied that what the Cardinal termed "his errors" were not errors but the truth of God's Word and that he would do nothing contrary to his conscience. Cajetan dismissed Luther by saying, "Recant, or do not come into my presence again." Orders then were secretly given by the Cardinal to take Luther captive, but he, being informed of the order, escaped capture.
- 5) On June 15, 1520 a Papal Bull was issued by Pope Leo X, condemning Luther's writings as heretical and ordered the destruction of his writings. In response, Luther renounced the papacy by burning a copy of the bull in the presence of a large crowd. As he threw the bull into the flames, he said, "As thou (the Pope) hast vexed the holy One of the Lord (Christ), may eternal fire vex thee." Soon afterwards he denounced the pope as Antichrist.
- 6) On January 3, 1521, the Pope excommunicated Luther.

The Diet of Worms:

- 1) Charles V who had been elected Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1519, was requested to deal with the case of Luther, which he consented to do. Luther was ordered to appear before the Emperor in the city of Worms on April 17, 1521 to either renounce or reaffirm his position. He was granted a letter of safe conduct guaranteeing him 21 days of safe travel through the land. Luther's friends warned him not to go reminding him that the safe conduct given John Huss nearly a century earlier had not been honored. Luther went despite their council.
- 2) The first day Luther appeared before the assembly in Worms, Johann von Eck, who was the Presiding Officer, asked Luther if he was the author of the books that were displayed on the table before them, and was he willing to retract the doctrines contained in the books. Luther affirmed that he was the author and requested that he might have

time to reflect on how to answer the second question, that he might not give an answer that would be offensive to the Word of God. The request was granted and Eck adjourned the proceedings in the Emperor's name until the following day.

3) Luther spent much of the night in prayer and standing before the tribunal the following day he answered the second question by saying, "Unless I am convinced by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments that I am in error – for popes and councils have often erred and contradicted themselves – I cannot withdraw, for I am subject to the Scriptures I have quoted; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. It is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against one's conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. So help me God." These words created an uproar in the assembly and the Emperor rose from his seat in anger saying to those around him that he had had enough of such talk and left the hall. Luther was then escorted back to his lodging with the Emperor's safe conduct guarantee holding firm and on April 25th, he was allowed to leave Worms.

4) On May 25th, the Emperor issued his Edict of Worms, declaring Luther to be an outlaw (meaning he could be killed by anyone without the threat of punishment).

Luther's Exile:

1) On May 4, 1521 during Luther's journey home from Worms, Frederick the Wise (a friend of Luther), who was concerned for his safety, arranged for him to be seized by a company of masked horsemen and taken to Wartburg Castle where he was kept for about a year. While in Wartburg, Luther lived incognito, growing out his hair and beard, wearing the clothing of a knight and referring to himself as "Knight George".

2) Luther devoted himself during this time of exile to translating the Scriptures into the German language. He was the first person to do so. The New Testament was translated from the original Greek in eleven weeks and was first published in September of 1522 and sold in German shops for an amount equal to a week's wage of a typical laborer. By 1534 the entire Bible had been translated and the printing of it commenced in the same year.

3) Though hidden from public view, Luther maintained contact with friends seeking his council and help. On March 6, 1522, Luther returned to Wittenberg, after hearing of disturbances that had broken out in the city. Many peasants under the leadership of Thomas Munzer, a former follower of Luther, claimed the power of Luther's teachings to demand more just economic conditions, even if that meant overthrowing the government. Luther responded by preaching strongly against the use of violence. His pleas were disregarded and the peasants were ultimately defeated by the authorities on May 15, 1522 at the battle of Frankenhausen.

His Final Years:

1) On June 13, 1525 Luther married Katharina von Bora, a nun who had fled from a convent in Nimbsch, and had taken refuge in Wittenberg. Katharina brought much joy to Luther and he often referred to her fondly as his "dear rib" alluding to Genesis 2:21.

2) Luther remained busy until the end of his days. Many of his writings have since been translated into English and make up 55 volumes. He was also a musician and poet, the most famous hymn that he wrote being "A Mighty Fortress is Our God".

3) He continued to teach at the Wittenberg University until the end of his life. His last lecture ended with the words, "I am weak, I cannot go on."

4) On January 17, 1546, Luther traveled to his birthplace (Eisleben), seeking to settle a dispute that had arisen between two brothers who were the Counts of Mansfeld. Though the meetings ended successfully, he did not have the strength to return to Wittenberg.

5) Luther died on February 18, 1546 in Eisleben and was buried in the Castle Church at Wittenberg where 29 years earlier he had nailed his 95 theses to the door.

6) In the summer of the following year, the Emperor Charles V stood at Luther's grave and was asked by one of his captains whether it would be fitting for the bones of the arch-heretic to be burned. Charles answered, "I make war upon the living, not upon the dead. Let this man rest until the day of resurrection and of judgment."