

Martin Luther: His Life and Legacy

Talking Points taken from

Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought*

In sheer terror, he made a vow to his patron saint. In disillusionment, he questioned the practices of the church to which he gave his very life. In firm resolve, he nailed his list of protests to the church door. In utter joy, he grasped the liberating idea that the righteousness of God is given, not earned. And in the face of intense spiritual battle, he cried out to God, his "mighty fortress, his bulwark never failing. These are the defining moments of Martin Luther's life.

Stephen Nichols

I. His Life (Born Nov. 10, 1483: Died, Feb. 18, 1546)

- **He had humble roots. He said "I come from a family of peasants."**
 - He said, "Who would have divined that I would receive a Bachelor's and then a Master's of Arts, then lay aside my brown student's cap and leave it to others in order to become a monk, thereby of course earning for myself such shame so that my father was bitterly displeased; and that despite all I would get in the Pope's hair – and he in mine – and take a runaway nun for my wife? Who would have predicted this for me?"
- **He was a great student.**
 - Hans and Margret Luther moved from Eisleben, Germany, the place of Luther's birth, to Mansfield in his first year. Hans was a miner, providing for Luther's education. A lot of peasant boys worked but Luther went to school, where he studied Latin, grammar, and the essentials (10 commandments, Lord's Prayer, and the Creed).
 - When he was 14, his parents sent him to study at a monastery in Magdeburg. It was known for counting among its members, Thomas Kempis. It was very expensive, and Hans' modest income barely founded his education.
 - In fact, like other peasant students, Luther often begged for bread on the street.
 - The next year, he went to Eisenach. He had relatives there and it was good for academic and financial reasons. He was at the head of his class.
 - He then went to Erfurt, where he was to study law, fulfilling his parents wishes. They wanted him to escape the "peasant class" and honor the family name.
 - He received his Bachelors and then Master's in 1502, and 1505.
- **His Life turned at Erfurt. He began to contemplate his guilt before God.**
 - After completing his MA in 1055, he was doing continued studies, and was on his way of fulfilling his father's wishes. In June of that year, he made a trip home and was in a violent thunderstorm. He was paralyzed by the storm and attached great significance to it; in total desperation he prayed to St. Anne, the patron saint of the minors!, "Help me, St. Anne, and I will become a monk."
 - Two weeks later, he threw a party for his classmates, and gave them his law books and master's cap and withdrew from Doctoral studies. Then he told them on the following day, he would enter the monastery.
 - "When I became a monk, my father almost went out of his mind," he said.

- **He became a devoted monk.**
 - o He said: "I myself was a monk for twenty years. I tortured myself with praying, fasting, keeping vigils, and freezing – the cold alone was enough to kill me – and I inflicted upon myself such pain as I would never inflict again, even if I could."
 - o He said: "If any monk ever got to heaven by monkery, then I should have made it. All my monastery companions who knew me can testify to that."

- **Turning Points**
 - o At the close of the century his superior at Erfurt expressed to the abbot, Johann Von Staupitz his exasperation with Luther (Staupitz hoped that the mental occupations with academia would crowd out Luther's internal struggles. He ordered Luther to be transferred to Wittenberg; which was founded just a few years earlier by Staupitz. Frederick the Wise wanted the brightest faculty, and approved of Luther wholeheartedly.
 - o Because Luther's speciality was not Bible and theology, he first became a student there. While as a student, he lectured on the arts and Aristotle.
 - o He began his second set of degrees, including a BA in Bible in 1509. He was sent back to Erfurt to teach the Bible.
 - o While there, Erfurt needed to send documents back to Rome. They viewed it as an opportunity to help Luther make peace, so they sent him. He made his pilgrimage in 1510. He recited prayers, up and down the steps of Pontius Pilate, getting to the top and asking, "Who knows if this is true?"
 - o Rome didn't help him.
 - o He went back to Wittenberg for a visit, and Staupitz couldn't understand Luther's inability to grasp God's love for him. Luther retorted, "I can't love God, I hate him."
 - o Staupitz didn't know what to do, so he ordered him to pursue a doctorate in theology! He received his doctorate in 1512.

- **From Augustine to Paul**
 - o While plunging into his studies, he began having issues with the church's theology; and began looking at Augustine then to Paul.
 - o He continued his journey – preaching, praying, doubting, studying, probing...
 - o He began preparing lectures on Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews.
 - o He eventually began to explore "alien righteousness" – righteousness coming outside of ourselves. He was heading in a direction far from Rome. It would take him a few years to fully reach his position on justification by faith alone, but he was already thinking about it as early as 1516.

- **95 Thesis**
 - o During these days, he was at center stage. The 95 Thesis was a short series of propositions concerning the sale of indulgences by the monk, Tetzel.
 - o Tetzel was on a mission from Rome. They were building the Sistine Chapel of St. Paul's Basilica, and they enlisted the likes of Raphael, Durer, and Michelangelo to build it. It cost a great deal of money. Tetzel gave a scheme to raise the money.
 - o Roman Catholics believed Penance demanded four steps: contrition, confession, satisfaction, and absolution. By purchasing an indulgence slip, you could short-cut the system, and have total absolution – "complete forgiveness of all sins." But if you buy now, there is more!: you can have total forgiveness of your dead relatives in purgatory.

- o This angered Luther. He then posted his 95 Thesis on October 31, 1517.

- **Luther's Conversion**

- o It probably happened around 1518, based on some of the things said in the 95 Thesis. Some are not consistent with justification by faith. And Luther regretted some of the things he wrote in the 95 Thesis.
- o He dates his own discovery (belief) of justification by faith in 1518.
- o He recalls that it was after he gave lectures on Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, and was giving his second set of lectures on Psalms in 1518.
- o His breakthrough came with the reading of Romans 1:17.
 - "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. And this is the meaning: The righteousness of God is revealed by the Gospel, namely the passive righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith ... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."
 - He moved from seeing that he could not achieve righteousness, but it had to be given as a gift, received by faith.

- **Debates with Rome**

- o After the posting of the 95 Thesis, he was summonsed to Rome to give an account. He didn't go, and was then summonsed to Augsburg in Oct. 1518 to debate Cardinal Cajetan. Luther stressed the authority of Scripture and salvation by faith alone.
- o He then debated Johann Eck. Eck put Luther in the same category as Hus and Wycliffe. Guilt by association. Luther kept arguing for authority of Scripture.
 - Luther argued that "the simple schoolboy armed with Scripture is better equipped than the pope himself."
- o He still was not declared a heretic yet.
- o Eck worked and got a papal bull (a letter issued by the pope) that declared Luther as an enemy of the church.
 - Pope Leo X called Luther a "wild boar in God's vineyard."
 - His books were to be burned and his followers were to be sent to Rome.
 - Luther, burned the papal bull publically in Wittenberg.

- **Diet of Worms**

- o This set the stage for his showdown with the church. Frederick the Wise intervened and kept Luther from being sent to Rome. He went to the Imperial Diet, or Congress, at Worms in April 1521.
 - Next to the 95 Thesis this is Luther's most famous act.
 - Charles V the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire oversaw the event. This was Charles V debut with the folks in Germany.
 - Luther arrived with a heroes welcome.
 - He was simply asked two questions:
 - Are these your writings?
 - Do you recant?
 - He requested one day to think about it.
 - He came back and requested a debate, but again and again Luther was denied the opportunity to debate. He then delivered his famous speech:

- *Since then your serene majesty and your lordship seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by clear reason, for I do not trust in the pope or in the councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves, I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.*

- This sealed his doom as a heretic. Later, the Germans would not hand him over to the papal authorities. Charles V placed him under a ban, and he could be hunted down and be killed by anyone. *Luther lived under this ruling the rest of his life.*
- Frederick the Wise, predicted the outcome at Worms and had Luther kidnapped at taken to one of his castles.
 - Luther assumed a new identity – Junker Jorg. He disguised himself as a knight, and even as a woman at times, and hid in Frederick’s castle in Wartberg.
- At Wartberg, he encountered great spiritual struggles – throwing the inkwell at the devil.
- During this time, he translated the NT into German in four months. He also wrote numerous sermons for the churches of Germany.
- Things eventually changed politically, and even though he was still under a ban, he was able to live safely in Wittenberg.
- **His Marriage**
 - Luther challenged the church’s practice on marriage. He married a nun! In so doing he said, “I hope all the angels will laugh and the devils weep.”
 - “There is no sweeter union on earth than a good marriage”
 - He called her “my rib.”
 - Frederick the Wise gave Luther the monastery as a parsonage – they had six kids, and four orphans, and always had guests.
- **Death**
 - Just before dying he said some memorable things:
 - “We are all beggars, this is true”
 - His final words on his deathbed were: “I thank you God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you have revealed your dear son to me, in whom I have believed, and whom I have preached, confessed, and trusted.”
 - His last sermon was John 3:16 and Psalm 68:20.

II. His Legacy: 10 Reasons Why I Love Luther

1. **We are in a Protestant church! Imagine a world without Protestantism. That was the world of Luther: it was Roman Catholicism or paganism. When he died in 1546, the world changed drastically; we had several branches of Protestantism.**
 - There had been previous attempts at reform: John Hus in Bohemia (modern day Czech Republic). He was burned at the stake. Wycliffe (England) died of natural causes, but whose body was burned by the church.
 - From Wycliffe, Luther realized the importance of placing the Bible in the hands of the people.
 - From Hus, he learned to challenge the church’s practices.

2. His influence shaped reformation ideas that continue to be the foundation of evangelicals.

- Sola Scriptura
- Sola Fide
- Sola Gratia
- Solus Christus
- Soli Deo Gloria
- These continue to define Protestantism
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3. Luther was also known for his colorful personality.

- He said: “Indiscretion is my greatest fault”
- One book is devoted to this *The Wit of Martin Luther.*”
- He said, “Sometimes I fart to drive away the devil.”
- Table Talk: “When looking at the puppy at the table, Luther said, “If I could pray, the way this dog eats meat! All his thoughts are on this piece of meat.”
- He said, “Be comforted, my little dog; you too in the Resurrection shall have a little golden tail.
- He had feet of clay. HE was not perfect. He had many faults.
- On the other hand, his personality is refreshing. He had no peers theologically, yet his little book *Table Talk* (which is a compilation of conversations around the table with Luther) illustrates his personality.
- He said: “Let the husband be head of the home... when the wife is not home!”
- He said, “Pray and let God worry.”

4. Luther loved the church. He worked tirelessly on every area of church life.

- Hymns – He said, “After theology, I accord music as the highest place and greatest honor.” Some reported that he was better musician than theologian. His instrument was the lute! One enemy said that his music did more damage than his teaching.
- Catechisms
- Father’s teaching children
- Worship
- He loved the Lord’s Supper. He said: “The Lord’s Supper is given to bring us new strength and refreshment”

5. He loved to preach God’s Word.

Here were his ten points to preachers:

1. Be able to teach so that people can follow you;
2. Have a good sense of humor;
3. Be able to speak well;
4. Have a good voice;
5. Have a good memory;
6. Know when to stop;
7. Be sure of one’s doctrine;
8. Be ready to venture body and blood, wealth and honor, for the word of God;
9. Suffer oneself to be mocked and jeered at by all;
10. Be ready to accept patiently the fact that nothing is seen more quickly in preachers than

their faults

6. Luther preached justification by faith alone.

- This was for him the doctrine that “opened the very gate of paradise.”
- He said that we must “beat it into people’s heads continually.
- He said: “The one doctrine which I have supremely at heart, is that of faith in Christ, from whom, through whom, and unto whom all my theological thinking flows back and forth day and night.”
- He said: “The law says, “do this” and it is never done. Grace says, “believe this,” and everything is done already”
- He said, regarding the centrality of Christ in the Bible: “The Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid.”

7. He did not preach justification by faith as a license to sin, nor did he avoid emphasizing good works.

- He said, “Works contribute nothing to justification but works follow.” He said, “Since Christ lives in us through faith, he arouses us to good works.”
- He said, “We do not, therefore, reject good works, on the contrary, we cherish and teach them as much as possible.” – Only he got the order right.

8. He was a writing machine

- Including *Bondage of the Will* and his commentaries

9. His commentary on Galatians impacted countless people in church history.

- Including Bunyan, Wesley’s and William Holland who said, “I almost saw our savior.”

10. He loved children and teaching the children

- He said: “I haven’t progressed beyond the instruction of children in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. I still learn and pray these everyday with my Hans and my little Lana.”
- He said: “I admonish you parents that if you do not help, we shall accomplish little with our preaching, and if I preach all year long and the crowd only comes in and looks at the walls and windows of the church, it is of no use to us.”

Luther preached his last sermon just three days before he died. He ended the sermon saying, “Much more could be said about this Gospel but I am too weak.”

Yes, much more can be said. And we must keep on saying it. Luther didn’t not reform the church on everything. Some things were left undone, but even that was a principle of the Reformation – reforming and being reformed constantly.

A Mighty Fortress is Our God

(1527, maybe at the Wartberg Castle awaiting the Diet of Worms)

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing;
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth:
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.