

## **If Ever a Monk Got to Heaven by His Monkery: The Life of Martin Luther**

Dr. William VanDoodewaard

---

*Professor of Church History  
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary*

---

### **The Late Medieval World**

To step into late medieval Saxony is to step into another world—a world very different from that of the present day, and yet at once very much the same. It was an agrarian world with peasant farms dotting hillsides and filling valleys. The narrow dirt or stone streets of towns and cities were walled by two- and three-story homes. Shops and businesses stood at street level. The pungent mixture of wood-smoke, manure, and sewage odors mingled with the better smells of baking and cooking. Soaring above the streets, pointing heavenward, were the steeples and spires of the churches, which loomed large and glorious at the center of every community and reflected the central reality of medieval Christendom in all of life. In the streets, shops, churches, and countryside were men, women, and children with hopes and dreams, sin and sufferings. Many of them were deeply religious. In the midst of this highly devout world, the centuries-long, slow loss of Biblical Christianity, centered on the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, was hidden to most. The incredible church buildings, soaring, glorious architecture, rich artistic beauty, drama, pageantry and ritual, crowds of people, pilgrimages and acts of devotion, all masked a loss of true spiritual life.

Yet, the veneer of medieval “Christendom” was thin. Among bishops and priests, sexual immorality was rampant; even the worst cases often led to a temporary suspension, followed by a quick reshuffling to a new location in the Church. Added to this were bribery, greed, gluttony, misuse of church funds, manipulation of church offices for self-promotion, and wealth-promotion. William Langland, a 14<sup>th</sup> century English writer depicts the religious reality as follows:

A heap of hermits with their hooked staves went to Walshingham on pilgrimage, with their wenches following after. These great long loafers, who loathed work, were clothed in clergy’s capes to distinguish them from laymen, and behaved as hermits for the sake of an easy life. I found the friars there too ... preaching to the people for what they could get for their bellies. In their greed for fine clothes, they glossed the gospel to suit themselves ... their money and their merchandise of preaching march together ... the worst mischief on earth is mounting up fast ... There also preached a pardoner ... he brought forth a document with bishops’ seals on it, and said that he had power to absolve all the people from broken fasts and broken vows. The laymen believed him and liked his words. They came up kneeling to kiss his documents. He blinded their eyes with his letters of indulgence thrust into their faces, and with his parchment raked in their rings and

broaches. Thus you give your gold to help gluttons, and lend it to louts who live in lechery.<sup>1</sup>

Calvin, a century or so later, described a Church filled with “monstrous abuses” led by priests and bishops who outdo all men in their

notorious ... excess, effeminacy, voluptuousness, in short, in all sorts of lusts; in no order are there masters more adept or skillful in every deceit, fraud, treason and treachery; nowhere is there a greater cunning or boldness to do harm. I say nothing of their arrogance, pride, greed and cruelty. I say nothing about the dissolute license of their entire life... there is scarcely a bishop, and not one in a hundred priests, who, if his conduct were to be judged by the ancient canons, would not be subject either to excommunication or at least to deposition from office.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, society in general was in much the same place; the people were no better than their leaders. This is not to say there was no true Christianity at all in the late medieval era—the Lord did preserve his church in the Lollards, Hussites, and others, including some within the walls of Roman Catholicism. But they were minor fringe movements compared to the mainstream of medieval Roman Catholicism.

### **Birth and Youth of Martin Luther**

Into this world of medieval rite and corruption, on the feast day of St. Martin in the town of Eisleben, principality of Saxony, November 10, 1483, a little boy, named Martin, was born to Hans and Margareta Luther. Just six months after his birth the family moved to the nearby town of Mansfeldt. Here, little Martin’s father worked his way from poverty as a younger son of a farmer, who did not inherit the family farm, to become a successful copper miner and smelter and eventually a member of the town council. Martin later said, “my parents were very poor ... they endured the severest labor for our sakes.”<sup>3</sup> Martin’s parents had great respect for learning. As their condition improved, his father often invited local clergy and the local schoolmaster to his table for meals and conversation—a pattern which formed a deep impression on the young Martin. The family was devoutly Roman Catholic in a typical late medieval German kind of way, mingled with a great deal of superstition. They very much believed in a world under a Triune God but also steeped in medieval superstition. It was a world of rituals, amulets, and charms, a world in which Mary was elevated as the Virgin Queen of heaven, and saints interceded and worked miracles, even by their remnant relics. While in some ways Luther’s family had become more of what today would be called middle class, Luther was clearly of peasant stock and status,

---

<sup>1</sup> For the original source of this adaption see William Langland, *Piers Ploughman: Critical Text – Prologue* (Piers Ploughman Electronic Archive), <http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/Bx/P?view=critical>. Accessed September 12, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1995), 355-356, 361-32. This quotation comes from 4.5.7 and 4.5.14 of the *Institutes*.

<sup>3</sup> Merle D’Aubigne, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 50.

of which he was never ashamed. “I am a peasant, I am the son of a peasant; my father, my grandfather, and my ancestors were all peasants.”<sup>4</sup>

Martin’s childhood was marked by hard work, schooling, and stern discipline. Corporal punishment was part of his life—perhaps as evidence of his stubbornness, he later recalled that one morning in school he was flogged fifteen times by the teacher. His father paid for Martin to attend this school, the Latin school in Mansfeldt, the best in the town. This period of early education did result in some foundational biblical and theological learning. Here he learned the Ten Commandments, the Apostle’s Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, along with other prayers and some hymns.

While his home life was difficult at times, he loved his parents and would later write about them with deep affection. Martin’s parents taught him to pray to God and the saints and also steeped him in frightening stories of witches, goblins, and demons. These vivid descriptions of active spiritual darkness and evil would remain with him; throughout his life, he regarded Satan as a vicious, personal enemy who wanted to destroy him. While crucifixes, and awareness of Christ’s divinity, humanity, humility, passion, and exaltation were common, there was no gospel clarity. Instead, there was a penance-based, works righteousness, a mentality that hoped to, rather than did, attain salvation.

In 1497, at the age of 14, Martin’s father Hans resolved to send him to the Franciscan school in Magdeburg. It was a hard transition: Martin found himself friendless and impoverished. His father’s funds having gone to his tuition, Martin had to beg for food, going from house to house. When his parents became aware of the situation, they sent him to a school in Eisenach, where they had many relatives, but things were not much better here. The family failed to help him, and young Martin once again had to alternate studying with scrounging and begging for food.

One day, while being mocked and rejected in his begging, a wealthy woman named Ursula overheard the harsh words, saw the disheartened and depressed young teen, and took him home for a meal. Her husband, Conrad, enjoyed talking with young Martin. A few days later the couple invited Martin to live with them while he continued his studies. Later reflecting on Ursula, Martin wrote: “There is nothing sweeter on earth than the heart of a woman in which piety dwells.”<sup>5</sup> Not only did this family care for Martin, they also helped refine his manners—an invaluable asset for his life in the future.

In 1501, Hans sent the 18-year-old Martin to the University of Erfurt to study law. Here at Erfurt, Martin Luther engaged the writings of medieval philosopher-theologians, like Occam, Scotus, Bonaventure, and Aquinas. Martin thoroughly enjoyed study; he loved to learn. He was blessed with an excellent memory and vivid imagination. Yet at the same time, he sensed the immediacy of the presence of God, the glory of God, the justice of God. He prayed often, and in the library for the first time he encountered and read the Bible. It fascinated and captivated him, and he came back again and again to read it. While not all of Martin’s time was devoted to study—he loved to play the lute, loved the outdoors, and enjoyed friendships and hospitality—his devotion to hard study, late hours, eventually led to him becoming seriously sick. Now his

---

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Tabletalk*, vol. 54 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 178, 458.

<sup>5</sup> D’Aubigne, *History of the Reformation*, 53.

mind filled with thoughts of death. Luther recounted that an old priest came to visit, and kindly encouraged him to take courage, telling him that he would not die, but would be used to console many: “For God lays his cross on those whom he loves, and they who bear it patiently acquire much wisdom.”<sup>6</sup>

While he did recuperate, around the same time a close friend died, making him think all the more about death and the coming judgment. Not long after, likely in the year 1503, on his way home for Easter, carrying his sword for safety in travel, Martin tripped accidentally cutting himself. He nearly died of blood loss before someone came along to help. That night the wound opened up again, and he cried out to the Virgin Mary and fainted. Once again, he recuperated.

Martin’s studies at Erfurt continued. Soon his father, thrilled at Martin completing his degree, proudly referred to him as *Sie* rather than *du*—adopting a polite term of respect ordinarily reserved for elders, or those with a higher station in life. With his MA completed, he was now ready to enter the law program, achieving his father’s dream for him. Returning from a visit to his family home, Martin was caught in a sudden and violent thunderstorm. Fearing an impending death, he was filled with terror of God’s wrath and judgment. He cried out to St. Anne that he would become a monk if his life was spared.

Luther later reflected, “Neither willingly nor by desire did I become a monk but surrounded by the terror and agony of sudden death, I vowed a forced, unavoidable vow.”<sup>7</sup> To his father’s irritation and anger, Martin now stubbornly held that he had to become a monk. Rejecting his father’s directives, Luther joined the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt on July 17, 1505, two weeks after the thunderstorm. This caused a substantial breakdown in the relationship between Hans and Martin. Hans had hoped to arrange for Martin a rich and honorable marriage, and he was also concerned that monastic life might make his son lazy and corrupt. And beyond that, the life of a monk would leave no resources for supporting his parents in their old age. Hans angrily wrote Martin, telling him he was disinherited and had forfeited the rights and relationship of a son.

### **Luther the Monk**

The change in lifestyle brought by entering a monastic order, including vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, was dramatic for Martin. But Martin was at times dramatic himself—Roland Bainton describes him as “extraordinarily sensitive and subject to recurrent periods of exaltation and depression of spirit. This oscillation of mood plagued him throughout his life.”<sup>8</sup> While a portion of his time was allotted to studying, which provided opportunity to read both Scripture and the church fathers, much of his time was consumed with monastery duties: sweeping the chapel, cleaning cells, winding clocks, scrubbing halls, doing laundry, and weeding gardens. And he also found himself expected to wander the streets, begging from house to house for his daily bread. In between, there were eight daily times of prayer, masses, and numerous fasts. Much of the day was spent in silence. Luther seized all of this with energy, commitment, and devotion—driven by the profound sense of need and desire to be right with God.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2016), 8.

Despite the fact that the monastery bore the name of the Augustinian order, it was not actually very Augustinian in its theology, but would be better characterized as semi-Pelagian. This was the kind of theology Luther had imbibed already to this point in his life, but here he took hold of it with a new zeal, earnestly engaging the daily exercises of life in the monastery as a novice. Roland Bainton narrates, “To the monastery he went like others, and even more than others, in order to make his peace with God.”<sup>9</sup> Luther himself would later recount,

I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.<sup>10</sup>

Martin did keep on for a good while. Seeking to satisfy his conscience, he did all that was required and went regularly above and beyond the call of duty. Initially, this seemed to work; his conscience seemed assuaged.

In the medieval mind, joining “holy orders” was much like baptism: both were viewed as cleansing, giving a fresh beginning before God. After a period of testing as a novice, there was a formal entrance into committed life as a monk. Two years of monastic life passed by quickly for Martin, and there seemed to be the development of some reconciliation with his father, especially after Martin’s two brothers died of the plague—which his father supposed might have been a judgment upon him for his anger towards his son’s monastic turn.

Now having completed his period of testing as a novice, and formally entering holy orders, there came a major milestone for both son and father. Martin was to perform his first mass, and he took the occasion as a good one to invite his father, in the hopes of furthering their reconciliation. It was a weighty event. The Roman Catholic priesthood, with all its ceremony and ritual, was perhaps even more detailed and precise than the Old Testament priesthood from which it drew patterns. As the mass was believed to be the occasion of the actual transformation of the bread and wine into the body of Christ, this was a vastly serious matter and needed to be done just right. Luther recounts that as the moment arrived, he froze in fear. Having stated the words, “We offer unto you, the living, the true, the eternal God...”, he was suddenly, in his own words,

utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, ‘With what tongue shall I address such Majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine majesty? The angels surround him. And shall I, a miserable pygmy, say ‘I want this, I ask for that?’ For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal, and true God.<sup>11</sup>

Luther felt so terrified that he had to force himself not to run away.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

His conversations with his father afterward did not go well either. Martin decided it was a good time to plainly asked his father why he had been opposed to his entering the monastery. His father's anger surged: "Have you never read in the Bible that you should honor your father and your mother? And here you have left me and your dear mother to look after ourselves in our old age."<sup>12</sup> Martin replied that his prayers would do more for his parents than a money-earning vocation would—and that he had been called by a voice from heaven during the storm. Hans retorted, "God grant that it was not an apparition of the devil."<sup>13</sup>

Both the experience of his first mass and the exchanges with his father left him disquieted. Doubts and questions—as often before—filled his mind. His thoughts repeatedly took him to this pressing question: "How could man abide God's presence unless he were himself holy?"<sup>14</sup> Martin now found himself on a quest for holiness, for assurance of salvation. He longed for peace with God, but it proved incredibly difficult for him to attain. At the same time, terror of divine justice often loomed over him. He feared the coming judgment of Christ and for all his efforts there seemed no solution. Late in life, he wrote of his futile attempts in this way:

The word is too high and too hard that anyone should fulfill it. This is proved not merely by our Lord's word, but by our own experience and feeling. Take any upright man or woman. He will get along nicely with those who do not provoke him, but let someone proffer only the slightest irritation and he will flare up in anger... if not against friends, then against enemies.<sup>15</sup>

As he looked within, Luther, in spite of all his efforts at penance and holiness, could not find what was necessary for his salvation. He wrote, "How can I dare believe in the favor of God, so long as there is no real conversion in me? I must be changed before he will accept me."<sup>16</sup> His self-perception was accurate, but as long as he sought to effect this change in himself instead of looking to Christ's sufficiency, he found himself tied up in impossibility. In the midst of this struggle, there were some in the monastery who proved helpful to him, even though they did not have a full grasp of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Chief among these was Martin's monastic superior, Johann von Staupitz.

Unlike most of Martin's contemporaries, Staupitz was Augustinian in his theology. Having a pastoral heart, he took interest in his junior monk. Aware of his willing care, Martin regularly shared his struggles with him. At one point, Staupitz challenged him,

Why do you torment yourself with all these speculations and high thoughts ... Look at the wounds of Jesus Christ, to the blood that he has shed for you: it is there that the grace of God will appear to you ... throw yourself into the Redeemer's arms. Trust in him—in the

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> D'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation*, 62.

righteousness of his life—in the atonement of his death... Listen to the Son of God. He became man to give you the assurance of divine favor.<sup>17</sup>

On another occasion, Staupitz counseled: “There is no real repentance, except that begins with the love of God and his righteousness... if you desire to be converted, do not be curious about all these mortifications and all these tortures. Love him who first loved you.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps most significant was his encouragement to the young monk to pour himself into the study of the Scriptures. “Let the study of the Scriptures be your favorite occupation,” Staupitz directed.<sup>19</sup> While Staupitz pointed in the right direction, his counsel lacked full gospel clarity. Despite his mentor’s patience, Luther remained troubled, if not increasingly desperate.

### **The Beginning of Luther’s Conversion**

In his account of Luther’s life, Merle D’Aubigne relates that one day, as he lay in bed sick and in despair, an old monk “entered his cell ... Luther opened his heart to him, and made known the fears by which he was tormented ... The venerable old man was incapable of following up that soul in all its doubts, as Staupitz had done; but he knew his Creed, and had found in it much consolation to his heart.” Leading Luther back to the Apostles’ Creed, the old monk repeated with kindness: “I believe in the forgiveness of sins ... you must not believe only in the forgiveness of David’s and of Peter’s sins, for this even the devils believe. It is God’s command that we believe our own sins are forgiven us.”<sup>20</sup> This, somewhere in the year 1507, was a key turning point, though there would still be some years to go before Martin fully grasped Scripture’s teaching on the person and work of Christ in salvation.

In the winter of 1508, Luther was sent to study and teach for a semester at the newly established University of Wittenberg: physics and dialectics, branches of medieval philosophy. But he also continued to immerse himself in theological study, learning the original languages of Hebrew and Greek and studying the Scriptures themselves. By the end of 1509, he had obtained his Bachelor of Divinity.

### **The Trip to Rome**

Soon after, Luther was called back to Erfurt, and in 1510, he was sent on a journey to Rome. The thousand-mile walk ended in a city that led to deep and profound disillusionment with the heart of Roman Catholicism. The corruption of the clergy was on blatant display, as were the masses who were either desperately seeking spiritual solace or simply giving themselves license for their sin. Luther later reflected,

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

No one can imagine what sins and infamous actions are committed in Rome ... they must be seen and heard to be believed. Thus, they are in the habit of saying, 'If there is a hell, Rome is built over it: it is an abyss from which issues every kind of sin.'<sup>21</sup>

Climbing on his knees up the Scala Sancta stairs as an act of penance, the Scriptures he studied came to mind and turned him even more deeply against the superstition and false teaching he was for so long caught up in.<sup>22</sup>

## **Luther Transformed**

Reflecting on Luther's journey, D'Aubigne states:

Luther quit Rome and returned to Wittenberg: his heart was full of sorrow and indignation. Turning his eyes with disgust from the pontifical city, he directed them with hope to the Holy Scriptures—to that new life which the Word of God seemed then to promise to the world. This word increased in his heart by all that the church lost. He separated from the one to cling to the other. The whole of the Reformation was in that one movement.<sup>23</sup>

Back at the university, Luther was called and appointed by his order to serve as "Doctor of the Holy Scriptures," publicly vowing on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October 1512 "I swear to defend the evangelical truth with all my might."<sup>24</sup>

As part of his weekly teaching, by 1513 he began a series of expositions of the book of Psalms. He followed this with expositions of Romans and Galatians, in 1515 and 1516, respectively. When Luther came to Psalm 22 in his consecutive exposition, he was profoundly struck by the reality that the only reason that Christ could have so suffered was that he was bearing the iniquity of his people. By the time Luther came to Psalm 85 in late 1513 to mid-1514, greater clarity was developing. Commenting on Psalm 85:4, Luther told his students,

[The Psalmist] is now speaking also about spiritual conversion and wrath. This is therefore, supremely necessary, because this cannot be done by human strength, only by divine strength. This is true because God is hidden in the flesh [in Christ], so that no man can recognize Him unless having been enlightened by God's spiritual grace. Hence blessed Peter, who had been thus converted and said, 'you are Christ, the Son of the living God...' If we are converted to the truth, God's wrath is turned away from us ... Therefore be converted if you want to turn away the wrath. But as I have said, this is impossible for us on our own, unless we seek to be converted by God."<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>22</sup> Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (London: The Bodley Head, 2016), 64; D'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> D'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms*, vol. 2 of *Luther's works*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1976), 156.

Luther's expository teaching now sounded the clear note of the necessity of sovereign grace for salvation.

Even greater clarity was found in relation to the person and work of Christ in salvation. In commenting on Psalm 85:10<sup>26</sup>, Luther stated that this and the preceding verses were a continuous prophecy and

prayer for Christ's advent ... mercy and truth ... have come together in one Person. For by the mercy of God the Word took on flesh for the purpose of fulfilling the truth of the promise made to the fathers of the Old Testament ... both are in Christ. If he had not given freely but on the basis of merit, then righteousness and truth would have met each other, and it would not have been either mercy or grace, but a debt. But now he has freely given, so that he might be mercy and grace, and true nevertheless ... Lyra says, 'Christ provided righteousness for us and thus gave us peace, appeasing the things that are in heaven and the things that are on earth. For by his suffering he made satisfaction for us according to the way of righteousness, etc.' A good gloss! For as God, angry because of our unrighteousness, did not have peace with us, so having been turned, he sent this righteousness for us by which he also sent peace at the same time ... Righteousness and peace have kissed because the same Christ is both.<sup>27</sup>

It was in coming to know Christ as Savior that Luther's study of the Psalms was a profoundly influential aspect of his spiritual transformation.<sup>28</sup>

Immediately after completing his expository lectures on the Psalm, Luther began to work through Paul's epistle to the Romans. There he came to chapter 1 verse 17, which, citing Habakkuk, states, "the just shall live by faith." This passage that had so often filled him with fear now became clear: faith was not worked by human achievement, but it was the gift of God, coming through the hearing of his Word, and the work of the Spirit. Years later Luther recounted:

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the justice of God," because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "the just shall live by his faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors to paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the

---

<sup>26</sup> Psalm 85:10 in the King James Version: "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed *each other*."

<sup>27</sup> Luther, *Works*, 2:163-169.

<sup>28</sup> Michael A. Mullett, "From the Psalms to the 95 Theses" in *Martin Luther* (London: Routledge, 2004), 50-75.

“justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven ...

If you have true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you and opens up God’s heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger or ungraciousness.<sup>29</sup>

How was this blessing of the grace of God possible? Luther knew it was because of the cross, because Christ had made a fully sufficient, complete atonement once for all. Nevertheless, while Luther grasped the objective reality of justification by faith alone through the full and free sufficiency of Christ alone as he lectured through Romans, it seems a full, personal grasp of this doctrine still took some time to work out in his life.

Luther’s expositional teaching had already attracted substantial numbers to his classes, but this season of spiritual transformation and growth gave new vitality to his lectures. Soon he was asked to occasionally preach in the Wittenberg chapel. D’Aubigne summarizes the attraction of his pulpit ministry:

The great seriousness that pervaded all Luther’s sermons and the joy with which the knowledge of the Gospel had filled his heart, imparted to his eloquence an authority, a warmth, and an unction that his predecessors had not possessed ... soon the little chapel could not hold the hearers who crowded to it ... the council of Wittenberg then nominated Luther their chaplain, and invited him to preach in the city church ... this was the beginning of new life for Luther.<sup>30</sup>

Along with continuing teaching, his life was now saturated in the study of the Scriptures, preaching, and pastoral care for the people of the town and university of Wittenberg. This was profoundly evident in his plain, heartfelt gospel preaching from the pulpit. Taking up a sermon series on the Ten Commandments he expounded and applied Exodus 20:3 for his flock:

All the sons of Adam are idolaters, and have sinned against this first commandment ... in it there are two kinds of idolatry—one external, the other internal. The external in which man bows down to wood and stone, to beasts and the heavenly host. The internal, in which man, fearful of punishment, or seeking his own pleasure, does not worship the creature, but loves him in his heart, and trusts him ... What kind of religion is this? You do not bend the knee before riches and honors, but you offer them your heart, the noblest portion of yourselves ... you worship God in body, but the creature in spirit. This idolatry prevails in every man until he is healed by the free gift of the faith that is in Christ Jesus ... how shall this cure be accomplished? Listen. Faith in Christ takes away from you all trust in your own wisdom, righteousness and strength; it teaches you that if Christ had not died for you, and had not thus saved you, neither you nor any other creature would have been able to do it ... Nothing now remains for you but Jesus Christ—Christ alone—Christ all-sufficient for your soul. Hoping for nothing from any creature, you have only Christ, from whom you hope for everything, and whom you love above

---

<sup>29</sup> Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 48.

<sup>30</sup> D’Aubigne, *History of the Reformation*, 66-67.

everything ... Christ is the one, sole, and true God. When you have him for your God, you have no other gods.<sup>31</sup>

It was this Martin Luther, even as he was being spiritual transformed, growing in understanding of the God's Word and salvation, who was thrust into increasing prominence. There is no indication that Luther ever desired a Germany wide ministerial influence, let alone a European significance—but this is what inexorably developed.

### **Going Public, Inadvertently**

From his intent for a local disputation on the 95 Theses on October 31, 1517, their unexpected print publication thanks to some of his students, and the willingness of printer after printer multiply them, Luther suddenly found himself in a very public role of the reforming monk-priest in Germany and beyond. He found himself grasping the gospel and, at the same time, standing at odds with the religious-political power that dominated every European nation: the papacy and hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. He encountered complaints, debates, ecclesiastical examiners, councils, diets, excommunication, death threats, kidnapping, emperor, and pope seeking to bring him to an end—and through the tumults, the Lord's steady, gracious protection. Princes like Frederick acted to keep Luther safe, and themselves became persuaded increasingly of the rightness of his teaching. Spiritual fruit spread as more and more of German and European society came to understand the gospel and find new life in Christ.

There is much to learn from Luther as a man, his struggles, his passion, his great sense of humor, his love for Christ. There is much to learn from Martin as a husband to his Katie, and father to his children, and the orphans he loved. There is much to learn from the commentaries, sermons, letters, and essays written over the remainder of his life. It is all perhaps best summed up in these words from one of his sermons on the Lord's Prayer:

We must preach Jesus Christ alone ... you ask, what is it to know Jesus Christ ... what advantage is derived from it? ... I reply: To learn and to know Jesus Christ is to understand what the apostle says: Christ is made unto us of God, wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption ... to believe is none other than to eat this bread from heaven.<sup>32</sup>

In observing Martin Luther, the monk who could never get to heaven by all his monkery, transformed from death to life in Christ, one can only respond by joining the Psalmist and declaring: "You, O LORD, have made me glad by your work, at the works of your hands I sing for joy" (Psalm 92:4).

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 117.