

# MARTIN LUTHER



Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483 in Eisleben, Germany and was baptized on the feast of St. Martin of Tours, after whom he was named.

According to his biographers he grew up in an abusive household where he was routinely beaten by his mother and his father.

On the way home from the University he was attending he was caught in a severe thunderstorm and when a lightning bolt struck near him he cried out, "Saint Anne help me! I will become a monk."

Years later, in a letter to his father, Luther explained his decision to enter the priesthood: "When I was over-stricken and overwhelmed by the fear of impending death, I made an involuntary and forced vow."

Monsignor Patrick O'Hare writes in his book *The Facts about Luther* the following:

"When we consider the motives that promoted Luther to abandon the world, we fear he knew little about the ways of God and was not well informed of the gravity and responsibilities of the step he was taking....parent and friend alike knew this and opposed his course, feeling it was merely the expression of a temporary attitude of mind and not a real vocation. Luther himself admits that he was driven by despair, rather than the love of higher perfection, into a religious career...He saw in himself nothing but sin and in God nothing but anger and revenge. He fell a victim to excessive scrupulousness....moved by his own feelings and relying on his own powers, he suddenly and secretly decided for himself a career in life which, as events proved, was not only a mistake...but one fraught with disaster to innumerable others, whom he afterwards influenced to join in his revolt against the Mother Church."

Unlike today where a man will spend eight years preparing to take his vows to the priesthood, in Luther's day he was only required to be in the monastery for one year and shortly after that he was ordained to the priesthood. Luther entered the monastery on July 17, 1505 and less than two years later he said his first Mass May 2, 1507. He recounts his first Mass:

"When I said my first Mass at Erfurt, I was all but dead, for I was without faith; it was unjust and too great forbearance in God that the earth did not at the time swallow up both myself and the bishop who ordained me."



*Scala Santa (Holy Stairs)*

At the same time that Michelangelo was painting the Sistine Chapel, Luther was in Rome and what he saw greatly disturbed him. The immorality of the Italian priests, their irreverence while saying Mass and their vulgar language completely disillusioned him.

In Rome are the stairs that Jesus walked up to stand next to Pontius Pilate. An indulgence can be gained by climbing the stairs on your knees. Luther climbed the stairs praying an *Our Father* on each step and when he reached the top of the stairs he said, "Who knows whether it is so?" That was the beginning of his doubt on the Church's teaching on Indulgences.

Returning from Rome Luther continued to doubt his salvation as he had always done. He went to confession daily repeating the same confession over and over. His confessor once told him, "Man, God is not angry with you. You are angry with God. Don't you know that God commands you to hope?"

Luther began to perceive that man's nature was totally corrupt. Protestant historian Roland Bainton writes this about Luther in his book *Here I Stand*: "Panic invaded his spirit. His conscience became so disquieted as to start and tremble at the stirring of a wind-blown leaf. The horror of nightmare gripped his soul, the dread of one walking in the dusk to look into his eyes of him who has come to take his life....these were torments which Luther repeatedly testified were far worse than any physical ailment that he had ever endured.....not even prayer could quiet his tremors for when he was on his knees the Tempter would come and say, "Dear fellow what are you praying for? Just see how quiet it is about you here. Do you think that God hears your prayer and pays any attention?"

Luther began to believe that God is not just. God has already determined a man's fate. Luther wrote:

"Is it not against all natural reason that God out of his mere whim deserts men, hardens them, damns them, as if he is delighted in sins and in such torments of the wretched for eternity, he who is said to be of such mercy and goodness? This appears iniquitous, cruel, and intolerable in God, by which very many have been offended in all ages. And who would not be? I was myself more that once driven to despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated him!"

Luther perceived God not as a loving Father but as an overbearing angry judge. According to Protestant historian Roland Bainton: "Luther had twenty saints, three for each day of the week, that he would pray to for intercession all to no avail, for what use is intercession if God remains angry?"

Luther began reading over and over the letters of Saint Paul trying to understand them. He began to interpret Paul's statement "the just shall live by faith" as saying that God justifies man by faith alone. Luther wrote: "Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through a door into paradise. The whole of scripture took on a new meaning and whereas before the "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."



The selling of Indulgences in Germany



Since the time of the Emperor Constantine, Saint Peter's Basilica had fallen into disrepair. To completely renovate the Basilica, Pope Leo X decreed that anyone contributing to the new St. Peters would receive an indulgence, the removal of temporary punishment due to sins already forgiven. As with all indulgences, they could also be applied to a soul in purgatory.

In 1517 to aid in this enterprise the Archbishop of Mainz Germany commissioned Father Johann Tetzel to preach indulgences throughout Germany.

Whether or not Father John Tetzel was responsible for the abuses, that certainly occurred, is debated by historians. One thing is for certain, the perception that anyone, regardless of the state of their own soul, could buy an indulgence for the deceased and they would immediately be released from Purgatory was prominent among the German laity.

"As Father Tetzel approached a town, he was met by the dignitaries, who then entered with him in a solemn procession. A cross bearing the papal arms preceded him, and the pope's bull of indulgence was borne aloft on a gold-embroidered velvet cushion. The cross was solemnly planted in the market place, and the sermon began."

*Here I Stand* by Roland Bainton

It is reported that part of Tetzel's sermon on Indulgences was the saying:

"As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

# The Perfect Storm

Martin  
Luther  
posting 95  
Theses  
against  
indulgences  
on the eve  
of All Souls  
Day 1517



If we were to go back in time to the years 1517-1521 would we have remained faithful to the Catholic Church or would we have joined the “reformers?”

These were very trying times. Only 150 years earlier the Bubonic Plague had killed, by some accounts, fifty percent of the population of Europe including huge numbers of priests and nuns who cared for those affected by the plague. Once again the world was threatened by the Muslims who now controlled Syria, Palestine and Egypt and were threatening Europe and the Catholic Church was trying to organize a crusade to protect Christendom.

Our grandparents would have lived when there were, for forty years, two men and then three men claiming to be the Pope, the successor of Peter. We would have known about the immoral, corrupt Popes and in our own lifetime Alexander VI who fathered four children while a priest had been the Pope.

We would have personally known immoral priests who had mistresses and children. We would have witnessed corruption among Bishops who appointed family members to high offices in the Church including the office of Bishop. We would have lived in a time when some Bishops held political office and the Church had acquired immense wealth. Living in Germany our attitude toward the Church was that Rome’s sole interest in Germany was as a source of revenue. The Church clearly needed to be reformed.

A well known priest named Martin Luther begins preaching about the abuse of indulgences. Instead of a reform of the Church a deformation of all Catholic teaching begins. Luther preaches that man is saved by faith alone, salvation cannot be lost as long as one believes. He teaches the Bible is the Christian’s sole authority. People begin to believe that there is no need for the Church which Luther begins calling the whore of Babylon and the Pope the anti-Christ.

Thousands of Germans join Luther and rebel against the Catholic Church and under Luther’s influence priests and nuns leave their seminaries and convents and renounce their vows. Luther is excommunicated, marries a nun that he convinced to leave the convent. The Church is divided and Protestantism is born.

**Next topic:** The Catholic teaching on indulgences

Recommended books: *Facts about Luther* by Monsignor Patrick O’Hare  
*How the Reformation Began* by Hilaire Belloc

Protestant perspective: *Here I Stand* by Roland Bainton

**Highly recommended** CD: *Luther: The Rest of the Story* by former Baptist Pastor Ken Hensley

Purchase CD [HERE](#)