

Martin Luther

The Great Reformer

Third Edition



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Statue of Martin Luther in Bielsko-Biala, Poland



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Calvin held Luther in the deepest reverence, and gladly called himself his disciple. He called him “that illustrious apostle of Christ, through whose labors the purity of the gospel has been restored to this age.”

Benjamin B. Warfield

Cited from *The Presbyteqan*, October 25, 1917, pp. 8–9

The Rallying Cry of the Great Reformers

Sola Gratia, Sola Fida, Solus Christus,

Sola Scriptura, Soli Deo Gloria!

- 1. Sola Gratia** “Grace alone”
This indicates that salvation is by grace alone. It is not by “works” but is solely by the unmerited favour of God.
- 2. Sola Fida** “Faith alone”
This indicates saving grace is gifted to believers by God through faith alone, and this itself is the gift of God by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.
- 3. Solus Christus** “Christ alone”
This indicates that the salvation that is by grace is through a faith in the person and “finished work” of Christ in redemption.
- 4. Sola Scriptura** “The Scriptures alone”
This indicates that the believer’s faith is grounded in the Holy Scriptures—the revealed Word of God in the Bible. It is not based on Christian tradition or any other authority—nor any mixture of such.
- 5. Soli Deo Gloria** “The Glory to God alone”
This indicates that all that we are and all that we do as believers is to be for God’s glory alone—and this was and is His sovereign purpose in Creation and Redemption.

Introduction

Great heroes are inspiring examples that help spur us on to noble endeavor. Nevertheless, we do not want to follow men so blindly that we lose sight of the Christ of God; however, there is room for conforming to the injunction of the great apostle who says, “Follow me as I follow Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1, KJV).

Luther followed Christ. He was not humanly perfect by any means—who of us is? Yet, he did what was right as God gave him to see the right, and it mattered not whether it was prince or pauper who tried to divert him from his path of duty. He kept right on battling for the truth. His own indomitable character is reflected in that hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

This biography presents the leading aspects of the life of Luther, and the Appendices contain choice examples of some of Luther’s writings. We trust this material will also inspire you to follow Luther as he followed Christ. To this task we are committed.

Michael J. McHugh
2003



Chapter One

A Poor Boy!

When Hans and Margarethe Luther laid glad eyes upon the face of their newborn son, they little thought or even dreamed that they were looking into the face of one who would not only change the destinies of nations, but who would also change the aspect of human history for all time to come. It is said that every child is an unlocked chest of possibilities. On the memorable date of November 10, 1483, God presented these humble German peasant parents with a gifted soul that had a God-ordained destiny, the extent and value of which will not be known fully until all human achievements will be brought to account.

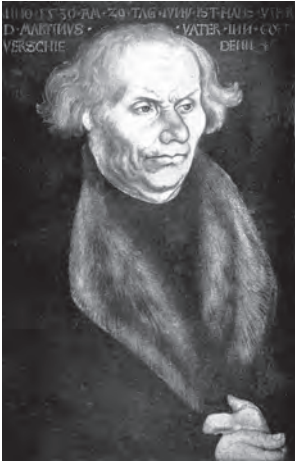
When a boy who has poverty for his companion is inclined to find fault with the company that he is forced to keep, he should comfort himself by reading about the boyhood days of Martin Luther—a son of poverty who, by the strength of God and the grace of Christ, stamped his name on every page of history written subsequently to his day. Martin Luther did not inherit from his parents luxuries that money can buy, but he did inherit those sterling qualities of character that came into such good play when he was brought face to face with those battles that proved him a great victor. He inherited sturdiness of character, strong willpower, steadfastness of purpose, honesty of heart, and a religious disposition. He who



Luther's Birthplace

falls heir to such should consider himself blessed of God and happy.

The Luthers were Germans. They lived in the Thuringian Mountains, also known as the Harz. If you look at a map of Germany, you will find that these mountains are located near the central part of that country. Nestled among these steep and beautiful mountains is the little town of Eisleben in the



Luther's Father

state of Saxony-Anhalt. In it Martin Luther was born, and there he died. The very next day after Martin was born, he was taken to the church and baptized, for his parents were very religious people, and they had been taught by their church that it was their duty as parents to have their children baptized as soon as possible.

Martin Luther was still a small baby when his parents moved from Eisleben to Mansfeld, where his father found work in the mines.

The struggle to provide a living for their loved ones was hard for Martin's parents. When he grew to be a man, he had this to say concerning those struggles: "My father was a poor miner, and my mother carried the wood from the forests on her back; they both worked their flesh off their bones in order to bring up their children."¹

And "bring" them up they did. Martin, his brothers, and his three sisters were not permitted to just "grow up" and do as they pleased. The parents taught their children religion—in those days it was quite generally believed that religion



Luther's Mother

could be most efficiently taught with the rod. Those were the days before the great religious Reformation, in which Luther was to have so large a part, had swept over the world. The then prevailing religion of Roman Catholicism was largely a religion based upon human traditions.

Luther's parents were devout Catholics. Their strenuous and even unmerciful discipline of their children, they believed, was the very best for the children's welfare. Because Martin stole a nut one time, his mother whipped him until the blood flowed. At another time, his father punished him so severely that Martin could stand it no longer and fled from home.

However, when Luther had grown to be a man, he did not harbor any bitterness in his heart against his parents. He remembered their awful grind of self-sacrificing toil and knew that they had toiled because they desired to give them proper food, clothing, and education. In speaking of the severe punishments that he received from the hands of his parents, he remarked, "They meant it well from the depths of their hearts, but they did not know how to distinguish the dispositions to which punishment is to be adapted."² In later life—when God had given him greater light regarding biblical truth and when, through him, this light had been shed over all Europe and even over all the world—he saw that the severity of his parents had only reflected the unbiblical extremes that had pervaded their generation.

As I have said, Luther was taught religion in his boyhood home at Mansfeld; but such a religion it was! It was a religion without balanced biblical truth, and such religion is always bondage most grievous. His mother gathered the children around her knees and told them of the Father and Christ. Yet what sort of ideas of God and Christ did Luther get in those hours of early piety? Hear what he says in later life about it:

From early childhood I was accustomed to turn pale and tremble whenever I heard the name of Christ mentioned, for I was taught to look upon Him as a stern and wrathful Judge. We were taught

that we ourselves had to atone for our sins, and since we could not make sufficient amends or do acceptable works, our teachers directed us to the saints in heaven, and made us to call upon Mary the mother of Christ and implore her to avert from us Christ's wrath, and make Him inclined to be merciful to us.³



The Roman Catholic Mass

The Lutherans, in accordance with the times in which they lived, believed in all sorts of supernatural influences. Luther says that in his childhood he had constant dread of witches and demons, which he believed always haunted his pathway or hid in dark corners to seize upon him as he passed. The forests that surrounded the town were supposed to be teeming with evil spirits; and beneath the ground, in the mines where Luther's father worked, was a possible dwelling place of the devil himself. Superstitious fears thus fastened themselves upon his mind, and he had no liberty until he found it in a saner conception of the boundless love and limitless power of Christ.

Such was the religious atmosphere that young Luther breathed. Such were the gruesome thoughts that haunted him by night and taunted him by day. Is it any wonder that a merciful God poured the light of Truth into his soul, and that the light which could dispel the darkness of that soul could also lighten the path of millions of others who sat in darkness?

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Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott, ein gute Wehr und Waffen
 Er hilft uns frei aus aller Not, die uns hat überkommen
 Und wem der Herr viel weisheit hat, dem soll man alle Ehre tun
 Er schlägt die Sünde ab von uns, und errettet uns von der Hölle
 Denn unser Herr wird wunderbarlich verschwiegen
 Und wer ihn lobet, der wird nicht schanden, der lobet ihn
 Denn unser Herr wird wunderbarlich verschwiegen
 Und wer ihn lobet, der wird nicht schanden, der lobet ihn

Martin Luther

Ein feste Burg aka "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"
 Written and Composed by Martin Luther
 c. 1527 and 1529

Chapter Two

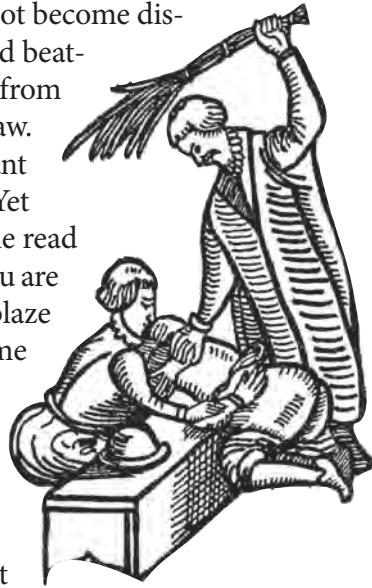
School Days

Martin's father longed to give his children better educational advantages than he himself had enjoyed. As Martin was the eldest son, his parents desired that he especially be well trained. Of course, strictly speaking, Martin's training began in the home at his mother's knee; but while he was still of a tender age, his ambitious parents started him in the village school. It seems that Luther attended this school more or less regularly until he was thirteen years of age.

When Luther met with severity in his home from the hand of his parents, that severity was mellowed with an honest love. Yet when the timid, barefoot boy stepped over the threshold of the village school, he found himself in different hands. Here he met severity without love. Doubtless Luther had some good teachers in school, but frequently, he suffered at the hands of those who were brutal and ignorant. He received fifteen whippings at school during one morning. This was not because he was so wicked, but because his teacher was ignorant. The lower schools throughout Germany at that time were hardly worthy of the name "school," and Luther compared them to "hell and purgatory."

The young Martin Luther did not appreciate such a school; however, he was not allowed to quit, for his parents had an honest ambition that he should be educated to become a lawyer. In this direction they bent every effort, but they were greatly disappointed, as we shall see later, when Luther decided to leave all worldly occupations to enter upon a strictly religious life. So Luther went on to the village school, studied his Latin, received his whippings, and hated his teachers until he was thirteen years of age.

It is a wonder that he did not become disgusted with teachers, books, and beating rods, and then run away from home and become an outlaw. Think what it would have meant to the world if he had done so. Yet perhaps, in those trying days, he read the life of some great man, as you are doing, and his soul was set ablaze with an ambition to become educated and good so that he might be able to accomplish something of worth in the world. Therefore, he continued his studies.



It is easy to imagine that young Luther had two burning ambitions—one to become wise and the other to become good—because he later became both, and he could hardly have become so without such ambitions. If a young man were searching for the greatest blessing in the world, he would search for righteousness; if he searched for the next greatest blessing in the world, his search would be for knowledge. Luther sought and found them both. If a young man tried to shun the greatest curse in the world, he would shun sin; if he shunned the next greatest curse in the world, he would shun ignorance. As a young man, Luther worked hard to shun both.

When the schoolmasters at Mansfeld were through pounding Latin into Luther with a stick, he was ready for a well-earned promotion. So about the time that Columbus was getting ready to make his third trip to America, Luther was getting ready to make his first trip to school away from home. This trip of Luther's took him to Magdeburg, a town located on the Elbe River about forty miles from his home.

Little is known as to what subjects the reformer-to-be studied while at Magdeburg, but more is known as to how he paid

his expenses. The school that Luther attended at Magdeburg was a religious school managed by pious folk who exacted no tuition of Luther because of his poverty. Young Luther, though freed from tuition expense, was confronted with the problem of meeting his personal needs by starting with an empty purse. However, when a young man is determined to have an education, he generally gets it—even though he has to conquer poverty to do so.

Despite being poor in purse, Luther was rich in natural gifts. He had a good pair of legs to carry him from house to house and a strong voice to sing when he arrived. He was also devoted to music and had a natural gift for it, learning to play the lute and composing numerous hymns* and songs of worship during his lifetime.

During his stay in Magdeburg, it was common to see him with a group of fellow students as poor as himself, singing at the front gate of a wealthy citizen. Sometimes, they were invited to come in, sit at the table, and eat with those to whom they sang. Sometimes, with eager hands, they received “hand-outs” at the door. The young student today, who has to do janitorial work or wash dishes in order to pay his school expenses, should take comfort from the fact that he is following in the footsteps of one of the world’s greatest figures—only instead of using his hands, Luther used his vocal chords and lungs.

While studying at Magdeburg, Luther was profoundly impressed with the strict piety that prevailed in connection with school life there. Thirty-five years after he had attended this school, he wrote:

When, in my fourteenth year, I went to school at Magdeburg, I saw with my own eyes a prince of [Saxony-]Anhalt ... who went in a friar’s cowl on the highways to beg bread, and carried a sack like a donkey, so heavy that he bent under it, but his com-

* His most famous hymn is “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (1527), which can be found on page 92. He also wrote two other Reformation hymns: “Oh God from Heaven, See It” (1529) and “Sustain Us, Lord, at Your Word” (1543).

panion walked by him without a burden; this prince alone might serve as an example of the grisly, shorn holiness of the world. They had so stunned him that he did all the works of the cloister like any other brother, and he had so fasted, watched, and mortified his flesh that he looked like a death's head, mere skin and bones; indeed he soon after died, for he could not long bear such a severe life. In short, whoever looked at him had to gasp for pity and must needs be ashamed of his own worldly position.⁴

Luther had seen the prince he describes here in the days when his boyish mind was filled with the philosophy of the ascetic. In those days, he had been taught and led to believe that the favor of God was secured by physical self-abasement. To behold such an example would naturally impress upon him the thought that this prince had a high degree of righteousness.

When Luther had sung in the streets and studied in the school at Magdeburg for scarcely one year, his stay in that city came to an end. Eisenach was a city twenty-five miles farther from Luther's home than Magdeburg, and in that city was a school known as the School of St. George. This was the native town of Martin's mother, and she had a relative living there named Hutter. Perhaps Mrs. Luther had hopes that her son could live with this relative, and thus avoid the necessity of begging his way, as he was forced to do in Magdeburg. In this she was mistaken, for Martin had no sooner landed in the city than the clear notes of his song were lifted on the breeze of the morning; and there he begged bread for his body while in search of "bread" for his mind.

Doubtless, he became very much downcast at times. He may even have been tempted to return home to Mansfeld to go into the dark mines and there spend his life toiling beside his father; yet that would have been a long and dreary song that had no ending. One day, however, Martin's misery did come to a happy termination.



Home of Ursula Cotta, also known as the Luther House

In the city of Eisenach lived a woman of beautiful character—Ursula Cotta. She had often seen the poor Luther boy in the streets and had heard the clear note of his song. She had eyes that see and a heart that pities. She saw in the neglected boy qualities of great worth, and she pitied him in his poverty. She and her husband, Conrad, invited the poor lad to come into their beautiful home and share its comforts. This event was the dawning of a new and bright day in Luther's life. It was the first time in all his days that he had felt the soft touch of refined sympathy. He spent about four years in this stately old house, which is still standing and visited annually by those who know of the great work of the reformer and who bless the memory of the woman who helped him in his hour of deep need.

Luther's stay in the city of Eisenach was indeed a happy one. He referred to the city in later life as "that dear city." He entered heart and soul into his studies in the School of St. George. He stored his mind with rich gems of thought and drank deeply of the spirit of piety possessed by his teachers. In this school, Martin came into contact with the great currents

of thought that were being poured forth by the intellectuals as a result of their research into old and neglected libraries and museums.

At the close of his four years' happy residence in the Cotta home, Martin made preparation to enter the famous University of Erfurt, which was about twenty miles east of Eisenach. By this time his father at Mansfeld, by reason of hard labor and simple honesty, had brought himself to a place of comparative financial and social comfort. He had been placed in one of the highest offices of the village. He was still ambitious for the educational success of his son and gave him all possible assistance in entering the great institution.

About May of 1501, Luther enrolled as a student at Erfurt. It seems that he remained at this center of learning for about four years, during which time he threw himself ambitiously into a study of the curriculum provided by the university. Not a great deal is known of the life of the future reformer during his university days. He lived a life of strict morality and suffered

somewhat from depression and some illness. In 1502, he took the degree of Bachelor of Arts, and three years later that of Master of Arts.

It took about nine years of study after leaving Mansfeld before Luther entered upon what, at that time, was supposed to be his life's work—that of a monk. He was, however, able to use the information gained in these years of schooling later in life, when he was called upon to combat the works and workers of unrighteousness in high places.



University of Erfurt

Chapter Three

A Great Battle

The life of Luther was a life of battles. Perhaps he never shouldered a musket, unsheathed a sword, or shot a crossbow, but he fought great battles nonetheless. His weapons of warfare were not carnal, though. Rather, they were spiritual—fought over his own soul.

From early childhood, Luther had been haunted by fears that God's wrath was being stored up against him. He felt sure that God was angry with him, and he lived in constant dread of the judgment day. Now, during the latter years of his university career, he was afraid that he might die suddenly and be eternally damned.

“What must I do to be saved?” was the question of questions in his heart. If he had ever read the Bible with proper understanding, the answer would have come sweet and clear, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, Luther, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Nevertheless, the Bible to him was a closed book. He read it more or less, but like Saul of Tarsus, he was blinded by the scales on his eyes. He did not look to the Bible for an answer to his burning question. Instead, he had been taught to look to the Roman Catholic Church for direction. The church replied, “Do good works, do penance, humiliate yourself, shut yourself away from the world as much as possible, and you shall be saved.” Luther believed the church. It advised him to become a monk if he wanted to be perfect and have great reward in heaven.

Yet, what is a monk? A monk in Luther's day was a man who had become so good (according to his own idea of goodness) that he was good for nothing. He was a man who had retired from secular life to give himself entirely to religious duties. This religious work was to be centered upon himself.

He was to make himself holy, not by faith in Jesus by which one serves his fellow men and tries to bring others to Jesus, but by works—prayers, fasting, and self-humiliation. He was to vow that he would not marry, that he would remain in poverty, and that he would obey the rules of the monkish order to which he belonged. He was supposed to live in a monastery with other monks as useless to his fellow men as himself, and to spend his days in keeping himself fit to go to heaven when he died. All of this is what the church told Martin Luther he must do to be saved. Luther, of course, wanted to be saved, but he did not see how all this would bring him salvation. So here is where the battle began.



All through his years in the university, this struggle went on in his heart. “What must I do to be saved?” “Shall I be lost forever, or shall I obey the voice of the church?” “Shall I give up hopes of a brilliant career in secular life?” “Shall I become a monk and be scoffed at by all my young university associates, and bring down upon my youthful head the hot wrath of my poor old father, who has worked so hard that I might have an education?” All of these questions, with others equally baffling, surged through his mind.

When Luther was in the midst of this struggle, certain happenings in Erfurt seemed to warn him that he was near the gates of eternity. The plague broke out in the city; many of the students died, and others, panic-stricken, fled from the place. In the face of these happenings, Luther became more solemn than ever. He tried to listen to the professors of law lecture, but their lectures were insufferably dry and uninteresting to him. What did he care for the long, drawn-out discourses of technical law when his soul was yearning for an assurance that it was saved?

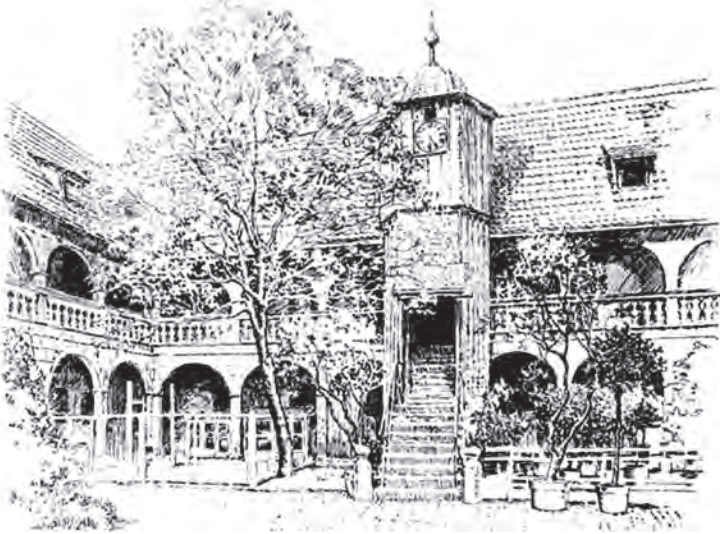
He left the university and went home, perhaps for the purpose of persuading his father to let him give up his study of law. We have no reason, however, to believe that his father consented.

In early July of 1505, as he was returning to the university, he was overtaken by a severe thunderstorm. The rain came down in torrents, the wind blew hard and the thunder roared, and angry streaks of lightning flashed. The young master of philosophy was stricken with horror. He thought the devil was actually after him. If it seems strange that a university student should get frightened at a thunderstorm, we have only to recall that a belief in the direct intervention of Satan was prominent in the thought of that day. Luther fell on his face and prayed, not to God, but to St. Anna; for he believed that he could not come directly to the heavenly Father in his prayers, but that some departed saint must intercede for him. Here he made a vow that he would become a monk. The battle was over.

After a few days, he invited a group of his fellow students to a social gathering. Here they feasted, sang, and had a jolly good time. Young Luther seemed to enjoy himself immensely with his friends, among whom he was a favorite; for he was a young man of high intellectuality and many pleasing qualities. In the midst of the fun, he broke the news of his decision to his friends with these words: "Friends, today you see me for the last time; I have decided to become a monk."⁵ They thought he was joking. When they were finally assured that he was in

dead earnest, they did everything in their power to pull him away from his purpose; but they were unsuccessful.

Two days later, he went to the monastery, where he disappeared behind the great cloister doors. The monastery that Luther entered was conducted by the Augustinian order of friars. There were several others in Erfurt. Luther entered this one because it had a reputation for being the best. However, if it were the best, pity the worst!



Cloister of the Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt

Luther had not been in this place very long before he found that some of the monks were not in any sense good people. Some, like Luther, doubtless had entered the monastery in the hope of becoming good. Unfortunately, many of them, instead of growing good, had grown worse and were not ashamed of it. Some were idle, gluttonous, and lazy—enormous fellows with red noses, showing that they were more interested in wine and sausages than in honoring God. Some of these impious monks made life miserable for Luther. They scoffed at his serious concern for his soul.

Luther was sent by the authorities of the monastery into the streets of the city to beg. As he had grown weary of beg-

ging during his school days at Magdeburg and Eisenach, he did not relish it here. Yet there were two reasons, according to the fat monks' way of thinking, why he should comply. First, his begging brought a supply of eatables to those in the monastery. Second, it helped Luther to be humble. It, according to the monks, brought a physical blessing to the monks and a spiritual blessing to Luther himself.

The monastery's dismal life undermined Luther's health. He refused to eat until he wasted away and became mere skin and bones. Finally, the vicar-general, or manager of the cloister, Dr. Johann von Staupitz, who was a kindly German, noticed Luther's sad condition and took an interest in him. He encouraged Luther to trust Jesus as his Savior, telling him that God was not angry with him, but that Luther was angry with himself. Later Luther wrote, "If Dr. Staupitz, or rather God through Dr. Staupitz, had not helped me out of my trials, I would have drowned in them and would have been in hell long ago."⁶

When Luther's father heard that he had become a monk, his wrath knew no bounds. He did everything in his power to persuade his son to depart from such a course, but to no avail. Martin was ordained a priest in February 1507. When he celebrated his first mass in May of that year, he invited his father to attend. Luther's father came, with some of his friends, and presented his son with a beautiful present. It seems that by this time, he had softened somewhat—but not altogether. Martin thought to take advantage of this occasion and tried to explain to his father that he had chosen a wise and noble course; but his father only replied, "Have you not heard that a man should honor his parents?"

Up at Wittenberg, about seventy miles east and about sixty miles north of Erfurt, was a new university. Elector Frederick III of Saxony, also known as Frederick the Wise, founded it about six years previously for the purpose of teaching the philosophy of Aristotle. Wittenberg was a much smaller and less attractive town than handsome Erfurt, but it was to become a



Elector Frederick III of Saxony

an optimistic spirit.

prominent name in the world's history. About a year and a half after Luther was ordained as a priest, he was invited to this new University of Wittenberg to become a lecturer on moral philosophy.

The young priest named Martin took the call to teach at the University of Wittenberg. He soon arrived and took up his new duties as lecturer with renewed zeal and