



MARTIN LUTHER 1483 – 1546

Martin Luther didn't set out to become a world-class leader. Born in 1483 he was headed for a career as a lawyer by age 22. Those plans were upset when he was caught in a violent thunderstorm. Lightning struck close to him and, thrown to the ground in fear for his life, he prayed to St. Anne that, if she would save him, he would become a monk. Luther kept his vow and pursued the monastic life with an intensity that went far beyond the already strict requirements of the church. He wore out his superiors with his excessive and interminable confessions. He said, "If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, readings and other works." But even with these superhuman efforts it did not bring peace to his tormented soul. When he said his first mass, he was (as he said), "utterly stupefied and terror-stricken at the thought of standing before the Almighty God."

His wise confessor and superior, Dr. Johann Staupitz, secured for himself a noble niche in church history by appointing Luther as a professor of the Bible at Wittenberg. Through his laborious studies of the Scriptures, Luther came to see that the guilt that consumed him could not be lifted by more religion, and the God he dreaded so much was not the God that Christ has revealed. Shooting forth from the book of Romans (1:17), another thunderbolt crossed his path: "Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is the 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 into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on new meaning, and whereas before the 'justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it came to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven . . ."

Luther was also a pastor at the city church in Wittenberg and began to preach his new found faith to his congregation. At the same time a representative of Pope Leo X, a monk named John Tetzel, was selling indulgences to raise money to finance the building of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Indulgences were letters of pardon which guaranteed forgiveness of sins. Luther saw this as a perversion of the gospel. He wrote up 95 theses in Latin and posted them on the door of the castle church inviting scholars to debate the issue of indulgences. It was no big deal as scholars did this all the time. And it was also no big deal in that no one showed up to debate. But the printing press had recently been invented and Luther's 95 theses were printed and within weeks copies were in demand and stimulating debate across Europe.

An epoch battle ensued. Within three years a "papal bull" was issued condemning Luther. He agonized through another level of inner torment in his life. Did he dare stand

before the power, wisdom and doctors of the church and claim that his interpretation of Christianity was correct? Before God he could not do otherwise unless convinced from Scripture that he was wrong.

Branded a heretic, excommunicated, banished and condemned by the Emperor Charles V, he was to be captured or killed on sight. Duke Frederick of Saxony kidnapped and protected him. He poured out his energy in study, thinking, writing, and translating the New Testament into German that everyone could understand. Later he returned to Wittenberg to deal with crises there, while his ideas and writings spread across Europe like water from a burst dam. The Reformation could not be stopped. Luther married a former nun, Kathryn von Bora, and they had six children. Luther died in 1546 in the same town in which he was born.