

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 50

Martin Luther – Part One

Today, we begin our study of Martin Luther. More than any other person, Luther was the catalyst for what became known as the Protestant Reformation. Luther was the man who not only left the Roman Catholic Church, but also took a significant part of Europe with him.

As we start our study, we might ask a few questions: Are you absolutely certain that God loves you? Are you fully assured he embraces you? Have you ever wondered if maybe, just maybe, you are not going to spend eternity with God? Or, have you wondered whether God really exists? Whether our “faith” is objectively true or merely something that helps us through our day?

There is a German word for these spiritual assaults that keep us from finding certainty in a loving God. The word: *anfechtungen*. Luther used the word over and over again. For Luther, this word described Satan’s onslaughts against us. Luther used *Anfechtungen* for the despair, the spiritual crisis, the fear, and the spiritual trials that came crashing into his mind, especially at night.

For Luther found that at night, in the darkness of his room, and in the darkness of his mind, he would face agonizing questions of faith. Was God real? Was the Church real? Could Luther really be saved? How could Luther be certain?

Luther assumed such questions must come from Satan. Yet even in that assumption, other questions, more *anfechtungen*, entered his mind. Luther wondered that since God was the ultimate determiner of everything, then his despair and doubts were either coming from God himself, or God was at least allowing it to take place.

What brought Luther to these questions? Where did Luther find his peace and resolution? These questions we can answer in part, but not fully. Let us consider...

BACKGROUND

On November 10, 1483 (probably), in the town of Eisleben (then a Saxon town, today part of Germany) Martin Luther was born. His mother was Margareth, his father was Hans. Their real last name was Luder (also spelled Ludher). Luther would change his name later as a pun on some of his writings and beliefs.

Hours after his birth, Martin's parents took him to the Saints Peter and Paul Church for baptism. Under 15th century Catholic doctrine, this was a cleansing of sin and Satan and the birth of Martin into the Church.

Martin received a good education. He started school at 7 and learned Latin as well as rhetoric and logic. School gave Martin a chance to sing both through schools and around town for small gifts and treats. Music would remain a constant love for Martin in life. In a later lesson, we will see how Martin's love for music transformed worship in the church.

In 1501, 17-year-old Martin started university studies at the University of Erfurt. He received his Bachelors degree in 1502 and his Masters degree in 1505. Martin's father was a miner. The need to have legally proper papers and land control issues prompted Martin's father to push Martin into law school. Martin started, but did not stay for long.

Later in life, Martin would recount that while in law school, he was walking in a thunderstorm. Lightning struck just a few feet from Martin and scared him half to death (at least, it scared him into a monastic commitment!). Martin prayed to Saint Anne for help, and in return, he promised to become a monk.¹ Within two weeks, Martin quit law school and sought placement in a monastery in Erfurt.

Martin took his monastic vows at an Augustinian cloister. Martin lay prostrate before an altar in Erfurt over the tomb of an Augustinian monk. Ironically, that deceased monk was present at the Council of Constance, which in 1415 had condemned John Hus (see Lesson 49). As Martin grew older, he began to see Hus somewhat of a hero.

¹ Martin's father was none too happy. As Martin took his vows, his father came for the ceremony. As his father was leaving, Martin's comment that God spoke to him through the thunder and lightening brought forth his father's response, "are you sure it wasn't the devil?" His father went on to probe Martin about concerns over violating the 4th of the 10 commandments where God instructed people to honor their father and mother (for Jews and some Protestants, it is the 5th commandment. The Jews consider "I am your God" to be one commandment and "You shall have no other Gods before me/You shall not make for yourself an idol" as the second. For Lutherans and most Catholics, these are all one commandment. The Jews and some Protestants then combine not coveting your neighbor's wife with not coveting your neighbor's house. Catholics and Lutherans break those into two).

This is not to say that Martin's parents were only superficially interested in the church. Their devotion seems apparent from Luther's later writings. We might fairly surmise his father's thoughts as, "I wished more for my son than the life of a monk." If only his father had known....

In the monastery, Martin quickly attached himself to his superior, Vicar General Johannes von Staupitz. Staupitz was politically connected with Frederick the Wise, the ruler in Saxony (This comes in real handy to save Martin's life later!). Staupitz found Martin to be an unusual talent and sent him to teach moral philosophy in the school at Wittenberg in 1508.

Because Wittenberg features centrally in Martin's life, it is worth knowing a bit about it. Johannes Cochlaeus (no fan of Luther's) gives a contemporary description of Wittenberg in 1524. Wittenberg was "small, poor, ugly, stinking, hideous, wretched, unhealthy, smoky, full of slop, populated by barbarians and sellers of beer² and not by real citizens."³ Perhaps most important, however, was the town had a printing press! (Gutenberg is credited with inventing the printing press in European usage around 1450.) This printing press would soon play a great role in changing the history of the Church and all of Western civilization.

In 1510 or 1511, Staupitz called on Martin to travel to Rome to try and mediate a dispute. Martin was not successful at the mediation, but the trip made quite a lasting impression on him. Martin was appalled at the sin and degradation of the city. He thought the priests were ignorant and impatiently hurried through the Masses. Thirty years later in a sermon, Martin would talk about his crawling step by step up the stairs at the Lateran palace pausing on each step to pray. The understanding at the time was that those prayers would shave off purgatory time for his loved ones. Martin paused at the top of the stairs and asked himself whether the whole ritual was truly valid.

After returning to his monastery in Erfurt, Martin was told by his superior Staupitz in 1512, that Martin was to go get a doctorate and become a teacher of theology and a preacher. Martin was not too excited about the option until he realized that he would be teaching courses in the Bible. So, Martin went to work on getting the degree and moved back to Wittenberg to teach Bible courses.

Meanwhile on a personal and spiritual level, Martin was having constant internal struggles, *anfechtungen*. Back when he had been at the monastery at Erfurt, these struggles had caused him to go to Staupitz for confession sessions that would often

² There were 400 houses and huts for the 2100 inhabitants of Wittenberg. 172 of those houses had licenses to brew beer!

³ Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (2004 Penguin Lives) p. 18.

last 6 “boring” hours. Staupitz would take Martin to task for being so picky and confessing things incredibly small and almost incidental as sin.⁴

For Martin, there was nothing insignificant in sin, be it large or small. Martin thought of God as an almost angry being who kept a suspicious eye on humanity waiting for any slight mistake. Martin would even confess sin about confessing sin. To Martin, the whole concept of confession was an effort to please God for selfish reasons and hence sin itself. Martin wanted to figure out a way to experience and love God and yet not use God in the process.

Times of confession became in itself times of despair and doubt, times of *anfechtungen*. Martin was never certain he was doing his best confessing, nor was he certain that his best was enough to please God. Martin exploded before his mentor that an angry God was making demands on humans that no one could ever fulfill. Staupitz insightfully corrected Martin and explained that God was not angry with Martin; Martin was angry with God! Staupitz urged Martin to focus not so much on the terrible judgments of a God we could not understand, but rather on the wounds of Christ that showed a love of God that we could rely upon.

Martin would challenge Staupitz echoing the question Martin posed in Rome earlier, “How does Martin know any of Staupitz’s ideas are legitimate? Staupitz appealed to the authority of the Church, but Martin had troubles with that as well. More and more, Martin decided the only real basis for any authoritative statements or doctrines would be Scripture.

Because Martin was now teaching the Bible, he read it over and over looking for answers to these questions that plagued him. Martin wanted to know how he, a sinner, could ever be reconciled to the perfect God.

We need to pause here and interject a bit of medieval Catholic doctrine on sin and its penalties. As we have discussed in earlier lessons, the Church taught that sin in the life of a Christian would result in time spent in purgatory. The Church taught that one could reduce purgatory time for oneself or one’s pre-deceased relatives, by paying to show honor and devotion to certain “holy relics.”⁵ Others could buy

⁴ For example, Martin would spend time confessing sin to such a level that he included a recitation of each time he passed gas. These seemed not worthy of mention to Staupitz, yet really plagued Martin’s conscience.

⁵ These relics were owned by a number of churches and wealthy citizens. The Saxon ruler referenced earlier, Frederick the Wise, had stocked the castle church and the church of the All Saints Foundation with 17,443 relics. Among this list were claimed the thumb of St. Anne (the mother of Mary), a twig of God’s burning bush where he spoke to Moses, some thorns from Jesus’ crown, hay stalks from the manger, etc. Marty provides the computation that “one devout

indulgences from the church, which would help alleviate the time deceased relatives were spending in torment in purgatory.

Martin was not convinced that these relics really conveyed such blessings. As Martin continued to teach Scripture, he realized more and more that Scripture did not seem to validate relicry (the belief that honoring relics has any value to the Christian walk) at all. What Scripture seemed to do instead was scare him over and over because of his inability to meet its demands for righteousness.

While Martin was pondering these things, other significant developments occurred. The Archbishop of nearby Magdeburg was a man named Albrecht. In 1514, Albrecht purchased from the Church the title Archbishop of Mainz (yes, as bizarre as it might seem, at this point in Church history these titles were usually sold by the Church rather than assigned on merit). To buy the title, Albrecht had to borrow a significant sum of money from the Fugger banking family in Augsburg. The money came at a noticeable interest rate, and required repayment in 8 years. Albrecht needed the money.

Meanwhile, the money Albrecht borrowed to buy the office went to Church headquarters in Rome. The Pope at the time was Leo X, and Leo was always in need of more capital.⁶ One of the characters that fueled the money needs of both Albrecht and Pope Leo X was a Dominican monk named Johannes Tetzel. Tetzel lived near Luther and went about the region using his superior preaching skills as a salesman of sorts. At the same time Tetzel would preach, he would also sell everything from “authentic relics” to indulgences and leniencies. These indulgences were certificates that sinners could purchase stating they would not have to make satisfaction for their sins in purgatory.

The theology behind the indulgences was similar to that of relics discussed above. Supposedly, Jesus, Mary, and the saints lived such incredibly pure and righteous lives that they had built up a credit of goodness before God. The pope, as the successor of Peter, was seen to have the power to loose or bind on earth in matters

and expensive visit to these relics in 1520 could help a sinner escape from such suffering for precisely 1,902,202 years and 270 days.” Marty at 19.

⁶ Leo was from the Medici family, a powerful and famous ruling family in Florence. His father arranged for Leo to become a cardinal at the early age of 14. Leo was 37 when he became pope, succeeding Julius II. Leo had expensive spending habits. He was lavish in most every area of his life. He gave money to retirement homes, hospitals, convents, students, injured soldiers, and the sick. He also used a good bit of the money on himself, often going out and about in a showy parade with his white elephant, panthers, etc. Leo also inherited the rebuilding of the Vatican from his predecessor. Leo made Raphael the architect of the ongoing building of St. Peter’s Basilica.

that would be loosed or bound in heaven (Matthew 16:19 was used as the text to justify this which says, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”). This binding and loosening power gave the pope the ability to draw down on these accumulated credits of good deeds and parcel them out as he saw fit. This was done through authorized agents like Tetzal, who would then collect money for the indulgence sold. Tetzal would then cut the Archbishop in on the profits, send a good bit of the money back to Rome and the Pope, and keep some for himself.

The public was never real pleased with this situation. In Saxony, Frederick the Wise was none too pleased either. Tetzal was, in a sense, a competitor of Frederick’s relic collection in the “fundraising from scared Christians” business.

In the fall of 1517,⁷ things fell into place mentally and spiritually for Martin in a way that shook the church to its foundations. Martin was teaching Romans and was spending time in turmoil turning over and over the phrase, “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last” (Romans 1:17). Martin’s own notes show his insight into this verse came while he was reading in the latrine. Martin would later teach over and over that the saving work of God often happened in filthy and otherwise less than prominent places (like Christ born in a manger among cow dung and Christ crucified between two common thieves).

Martin felt “born again” when jolted by the realization that this angry God, whose pleasure he could never merit, would accept as full righteousness the faith of a sinner.⁸ Martin had *anfechtungen* that kept him from sleep, kept him from health, and kept him emotionally disturbed. Martin was plagued by his inability to come to God with even one good deed. The idea that faith would set one right with God opened the spiritual world to Martin much like Paul’s vision on the road to Damascus.

In October of 1517, Martin naively wrote to Archbishop Albrecht a letter setting out his shock and concern over Tetzal and the selling of indulgences. Martin

⁷ Most scholars accept this date. Luther would later in his autobiography write that his best memory placed the events in 1519, however, late 1517 or early 1518 is recognized as more likely.

⁸ Luther's Tower Experience: Martin Luther Discovers the True Meaning of Righteousness An Excerpt From Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Works (1545) by Dr. Martin Luther, 1483-1546. Translated by Bro. Andrew Thornton, OSB from the "Vorrede zu Band I der Opera Latina der Wittenberger Ausgabe. 1545" in vol. 4 of *Luthers Werke in Auswahl*, ed. Otto Clemen, 6th ed., (Berlin: de Gruyter. 1967) pp. 421-428.

signed his name, “Luther” rather than Ludher or Luder. This was Luther’s efforts at a pun off the name he would give himself “Eleutherius” meaning “the free one.” With that brush of a pen, Martin Ludher became Martin Luther.

Albrecht did not come down on Tetzel or the indulgence system at all. Luther then took the points that he had written to the Archbishop and turned them into 95 points for debate. We call those points the 95 Theses. Luther nailed those to the door of the Wittenburg Church. Luther nailed these to the door with a call for a public academic debate on these points.⁹

No one but Luther showed up for the debate, but the points themselves were not without results. Someone grabbed the points, took them to the printing press, copied them in Latin (as they were written), and translated them into German. Then, they were disbursed quickly throughout Germany.¹⁰ The points struck a responsive chord in the people who were frustrated and tired of being convinced that God’s favor was for sale. Of course, Tetzel was furious. Luther was meddling in Tetzel’s area in ways that affected not only his income, but also that of the Archbishop and Rome itself. Tetzel went to Albrecht and sent messages to the Vatican to reel Luther in.

With his 95 Theses, Luther went from a relatively unknown teacher in a backwater town to someone of great fame. He was well on his way to becoming what the pope would describe as the wild boar who was digging at the roots of the vineyard known as the Roman Catholic Church.¹¹

Luther, meanwhile, continued to enjoy the protection of Frederick the Wise. Economically, Luther was affecting the income of Frederick derived from his relic collection, but the Theses were more pointed toward the sale of indulgences. Neither Tetzel nor the Church could apprehend Luther while in the care and protection of Frederick.

⁹ Nailing theses to the church door was not unusual. The door functioned as a bulletin board for the school and town. It was also commonplace to post “theses.” By that we mean points for debate. It was a bit odd that Luther posted the points rather than the University Proctor. The posting reverberated history because of its *content* not the manner of its posting

¹⁰ We have independent reports of the 95 Theses being read and discussed throughout Germany in Merseburg, Hamburg, Nuremberg, Bitterfeld and Mainz within weeks.

¹¹ Almost overnight, Luther became famous (or infamous depending on perspective). The Wittenberg University (which was young and without reputation before) suddenly became the hotbed for study. People from all over enrolled to learn and hear from Luther.

So, Luther continued. While Luther would teach and preach to a few hundred, the printing press took his teachings and writings and distributed them to thousands upon thousands. People began to rally around Luther's ideas that quickly translated into the practical implication that people should not be sending their money to Rome to build a massive cathedral; rather, the money should be kept locally for local needs. Tetzl came up with his own 106 Theses in response to Luther, but no one really paid much attention to them.

The Church then sent in Johannes Eck, a skilled debater and knowledgeable church scholar, to take on Luther and his ideas. At this point, Luther was not denying or quitting the church, but Luther was teaching that neither the pope nor priests held any power to open or close the doors of purgatory. Nor were they empowered to shorten anyone's time there. Luther's 62nd thesis proclaimed, "The true treasury of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God."

Luther taught that penance was an invention of the church. His very first Thesis stated, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matthew 4:17] he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."¹² For Luther, repentance was never linked to something priests could oversee and regulate. Repentance was something that flowed first from inside a person and then into actions of the person.

These teachings of Luther threw him into serious conflict with the church. There were repeated attempts by Luther's adversaries in the church to apprehend him, but to no avail. Luther was brought before several debates in an effort to quiet his teaching or embarrass him before the masses and the scholars. These efforts never panned out, however. In the debates, Luther was able to use the Bible effectively to thwart the efforts of those against him.

While Luther is the one we most commonly associate with the Protestant Reformation, he did not act alone. As we will see in the next few weeks, Luther had a number of friends and early supporters who worked in concert with him as they set about questioning the economic underpinnings of the Roman Church. One of these was the linguist professor at Wittneburg, Philip Melanchthon, whom we will study in one of our later classes. Melanchthon was a bit more systematic and deliberate in his efforts, while Luther was more moved by the moment dealing with matters in a more spontaneous fashion. Also going on contemporaneously were the efforts of a Swiss man named Huldreich Zwingli. These efforts were shaking the church from a number of different fronts.

¹² *Martin Luther's 95 Theses*, edited by Kurt Aland (Concordia Publishing House 1967).

We will pick up our story here in another class to see additional assaults Luther brought upon church doctrine, the efforts to capture and prosecute Luther for heresy, and Luther's ultimate excommunication and resultant split from the church. But first, we need to focus a bit more on the points for home thus far.

POINTS FOR HOME

Consider the questions at the start of this class. Consider the spiritual questions and assaults of *anfechtungen*. Luther found something in these great times of turmoil – God. Luther found God in ways he had never before been taught.

Luther took the Genesis 32 account of Jacob at the Jabbok and saw himself and other Christians in the story. In Genesis, we have the following account:

22 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. **23** After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. **24** So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. **25** When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. **26** Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

27 The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered.

28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, ^[e] because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

29 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, ^[f] saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

31 The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, ^[g] and he was limping because of his hip. **32** Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.

Luther could relate this story to his life. As Jacob wrestled at night, Luther found his anxieties and weaknesses came out most pronounced when alone at night. Luther believed that Jacob wrestled that night "not against flesh, blood, the devil, and a good angel but against God appearing in hostile form." For Luther, Jacob's

wrestling foe was Jesus Christ himself, eternal God and future Man. When Jacob refused to let go, Luther saw this as the Christian refusal to leave God, even though the Christian cannot overpower God and claim a spiritual victory. The willingness to hold onto a God we can never claim by conquering is a premise of Luther's understanding of God's work in the midst of our *anfechtungen*, our struggles.

Luther saw that as we are fearful about God's wrath, as we wonder about his love and care, as we question his existence, and yet as we continue to cling to him, we do have a victory over God in a sense. Luther would stress the line, "Your names will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." Luther would write, "In this passage it is expressly stated: 'You have prevailed with God,' not only 'you have striven with God' but also 'you have conquered.'"

Luther would quickly note the absurdity and misimpression some might have over the idea that we are called "conquerors of God," but Luther held it nonetheless true, in a spiritual sense. "In theology, it is right and godly to say that God is conquered by us" Luther would say.

Luther did not believe we conquered God in the sense that we overpowered Him and He is now subjected to us. Luther understood that, "When you think that our Lord God has rejected a person, you should think that our Lord God has him in His arms and is pressing him to His heart." Luther meant that we wrestle with God in our fears and trials, and as at the Jabbok with Jacob, with "his omnipotence concealed. God conquered has surrendered and is bound to and by the divine promise." In other words, we have conquered God because he has bound himself to us with his own promise even though as a righteous judge, his wrath and fury should bring eternal damnation to us all. Our conquering has taken the angry judge and seen Him become a loving Father.

Now for Luther, this victory we have does not come from our skill in wrestling. Jacob was never able to win on the merits. Try as he might, all night long, Jacob never outwrestled God. God threw Jacob's hip out of socket, not vice versa. But man kept hold of God, and the victory, Luther taught, came from faith in God. The wrestling continued, but Jacob would never let go. He believed God could and would bless him. Luther believed that stood for the faith and trust Paul wrote of in Romans.

When Luther experienced an understanding that the "righteous shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17), he found an answer to the impossibility of pleasing God with self-righteousness. Although Luther could never find any deed of his own that he would reckon good and worthy of God, his faith and trust was a different matter.

That is not to say that Luther thought that one had to have “perfect” faith or some true reckoning of God to then merit the favor of righteousness. Then, faith becomes nothing more than a work or meritorious deed in itself. He would write, “faith does not require information, knowledge, or certainty.” At the center of faith was the experience of trusting the divine love of God, revealed in the atoning sacrifice of Christ.

So we close this first session with Luther noting:

1. There is a reason for anxiety. Whether one understands God and his righteous law or not, condemnation awaits. “All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law” (Romans 2:12). “There is no one righteous... no one who does good” (Romans 3:10-12).

2. Yet,
“a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known...This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.... For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:21-24).

In this, there is “peace that passes understanding” (Philippians 4:7) for those with struggles and *anfechtungen*.