

Foreword by Michael Reeves

Convinced by Scripture



The Life of Martin Luther

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CHAPTER 1

THE BOY

*‘When God wants to speak with us he does not avail
Himself of an angel but of parents’*

LUTHER

On 31st October 1517 a 33-year-old university professor nailed a series of theological propositions and arguments to the doors of the church in the small German city where he lived. In doing so, he was imagining he would spark a debate in academic and ecclesiastical circles. In actual fact he changed Europe and ultimately the world. Today there are over 800 million people across the globe who could be described as ‘Protestant’ in one way or another. The stranglehold on Christian faith exercised by the Roman Catholic Church through the ministry of the priesthood was broken forever and the Bible became a book that was open to all to read and explore. The city was Wittenberg in Saxony, eastern Germany, and the university professor was Martin Luther.

Luther was born on 10th November 1483 in Eisleben, a small Saxon town with a population of only a few thousand. His early years were entirely unremarkable and there is nothing in his childhood that might lead us to imagine his future significance. Catholic opponents writing fifty years after his birth spread the story that his mother had had sex with the Devil to spawn a heretical monster. In fact, Luther's father and mother were entirely ordinary. They were good Catholics; he was baptized the day after he was born on St Martin's Day, hence his name. His father, Hans, was of peasant stock but had done well for himself and had become a copper smelter. When Martin was only three years old the family moved to Mansfeld and there his father continued to climb the social ladder, serving as a town councillor. When he died in 1530 Hans would leave a sizeable sum of money in his will. Luther's mother, Margarethe, invested most of her energies caring for the large family. Martin was the second of five children who survived into adulthood. He had a brother, Jacob, and three sisters.

Growing up as a small boy in the 1490s was very different from childhood today. Corporal punishment from parents and schoolteachers alike was part and parcel of everyday life. Both Martin's mother and his father exercised firm discipline when he stepped out of line. Luther recalled later in life how once 'for the sake of stealing a nut, my mother once beat me until the blood flowed'. Hans was no more easy-going. On one occasion he whipped his son so hard that he ran away

and for some while after the young boy was full of anger and resentment towards his father. That Luther was a young boy with a well-developed and tender conscience should come as no surprise – his life as a young adult in the monastery in Erfurt displays similar traits.

In keeping with his increasing social status, Hans was ambitious for his eldest son, hoping that one day Martin might become a lawyer. Hans therefore ensured that Luther went to the best local schools in Mansfeld, Madgeberg and Eisenach. Living away from home for much of the time, Luther was well cared for by various members of his extended family. However, the classroom experience was far from a happy one. He was a quiet and studious boy, but even his natural intelligence did not mean he avoided the barbaric teaching methods of the age. He spoke of his schooling later in adult life as something between purgatory and hell. Failure in Latin drills resulted in the teacher making use of the rod and any one pupil could be beaten up to fifteen times a week. Conversing in German rather than Latin meant being made to wear a donkey mask until another student made the same mistake.

The Church played a hugely important role in Luther's life as a small boy just as it did for all Catholics living in late-medieval Europe. Every baptized man, woman and child was a Christian. Only those who were Jewish by birth, heretical by persuasion or practising witches were not considered to be part of the universal or 'Catholic' Church. The supernatural was accepted as a normal part of everyday life. Fairies and goblins, demons, saints and

angels all played their part in the world order whether for good or for ill. The Christian faith was altogether more 'earthy', physical and tangible than it has become. Luther grew up in a world where the relics (bones and material remains of saints) and other 'holy objects' held miraculous powers. Luther's own ruler, Duke Frederick the Wise of Saxony, held the largest collection of relics (over 19,000!) in the whole world. He had gone on pilgrimage to the Holy Land as a young man and had come back with the thumb of his favourite saint, Anna, the mother of the Virgin Mary. To this he added a whole host of bizarre objects which were believed to have miraculous powers – a tooth of St Jerome, four body parts of St Augustine, seven parts of the veil of the Virgin Mary which had been spattered by the blood of Christ, a piece of the infant Jesus' swaddling clothes together with some of the gold and myrrh given by the Wise Men, a strand of Christ's beard and even a twig from the burning bush! A viewing of these objects together with the necessary financial contribution would reduce time in purgatory (see below) for up to 2 million years! To us such paraphernalia seems almost laughable. To people living in late medieval Europe they were part and parcel of the salvation process.

To Luther as a young boy Jesus Christ was first and foremost the judge of the whole universe. He was terrifying in His wrath and fierce in His condemnation of sin. Far from being the mediator between God and man that Paul describes in 1 Timothy 2:5, Christ Himself needed someone to mediate between Himself and sinful

human beings. This was where the saints, and particularly the Virgin Mary, came in. Their merits and righteousness had created a surplus ‘pool’ of grace which could be accessed through indulgences which were granted by the Church. Technically speaking, indulgences were granted by the Church (or even purchased) as an alternative to having to perform an act of penance. Ordinary people, however, had come to believe that salvation could be purchased through indulgences – the ultimate ‘prosperity Gospel’ message! You could even buy indulgences for your dead loved ones who might well be languishing in purgatory. Purgatory is taught nowhere in the Bible, but verses from the Apocrypha (2 Maccabees 12:43–46) had led the Catholic Church to teach that there was a middle place between Heaven and Hell where you could be purified from your sin before entry into Heaven. In a society where infant mortality rates were sky high, the pressure as a parent to buy an indulgence in order to ensure that your dead infant reached Heaven at the earliest available opportunity was enormous.

Luther and his family were devout in every respect in their faith. As serious-minded Catholics, the high point of their worship was attendance at Mass. This was the service at which the bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ through the miracle of transubstantiation. The priest stood with his back to the congregation reciting the service in Latin and, as he got to the words ‘*Hoc est corpus meum*’ (this is my body), the bread or host, as it was called, was offered up to God as a re-enactment of the sacrifice

of Christ at Calvary. Various people in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had challenged both the popular superstition surrounding relics, saints and pilgrimages and the high theology of the Mass. Luther took it all at face value. He seems, as far as we can tell, to have been a good pious Catholic boy.

CHAPTER 2

THE MONK

'If ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was me'

LUTHER

In the summer of 1505 Luther was travelling on the road from Mansfeld to Erfurt. Life was good. He had been home to visit his family and was returning to university where he was studying Law. An illustrious career lay ahead of him. As he reached the village of Stotternheim a violent thunderstorm rolled in. Deep in the forest a sense of foreboding and gloom came upon him. Luther, like most people of his time, believed that thunderstorms and other natural phenomenon were signs of God's divine judgment and displeasure. Suddenly, as he took shelter, a bolt of lightning hit a tree right next to where he was standing. Luther was terrified and feared for his life. He cried out 'Dear God! Help me St Anne, I will become a monk!'

St Anne was both the patron saint of miners and, according to legend, the grandmother of Jesus. In invoking

such an important saint, Luther was responding like any other devout Catholic of his time. His father was furious with him for his resolution to become a monk, however. Hans had known the struggles and hardships of poverty in his early life but had climbed the social ladder to a position of moderate wealth and security. He had then invested considerable sums of money into his son's schooling and university fees and lodging, no doubt basking in the reflected glory of Martin's achievements and future prospects as a lawyer. All this was now in serious jeopardy.

Ignoring his parents' objections, Luther presented himself at the Augustinian friary in Erfurt two weeks later. The Augustinians were a strict order and this was probably what appealed to Luther about them. He was not looking for a life of ease and pleasure, but rather was trying to do everything he possibly could to secure and guarantee the salvation of his soul. However, the next seven years proved to be the unhappiest in Luther's life. He embraced the monastic life enthusiastically and wholeheartedly. During the cold winter nights he nearly froze to death on occasions because he refused blankets and he nearly starved himself to death, such was his commitment to fasting. The problem for Luther was not what he was required to do physically but what was required of him spiritually.

According to the school of thought that Luther was trained in, salvation was the result of a co-operation between our human efforts and the grace of God. Over a thousand years earlier the great Church Father Augustine

of Hippo (354–430) had roundly condemned as heretical the self-help attempts at salvation offered by the British monk Pelagius (c390–418). However, his ideas, known as ‘Pelagianism’, or at least a diluted version of them, had once again reared their ugly head in the Church. Luther came to believe that his salvation could only be secured as a result of him maximizing his efforts to please God. As God saw him acting in this way, straining with every fibre of his being to do his very best, then God would give him the grace that was needed to be accepted by a holy God. Righteousness came, according to this line of thinking, as a combination of human endeavour and the grace of God.

The big question for Luther was what did it mean to do one’s very best? A range of possibilities were open to the Christian faithful at this time. There were pilgrimages to go on and opportunities to visit the holiest shrines in all of Christendom. There were indulgences which could be purchased and intercessions which could be made to the saints. Best of all, he could avail himself of the seven sacraments of the Church through which the priesthood ministered the grace of God to the Christian faithful. These were baptism, communion, penance, the last rites, marriage, confirmation and holy orders. For Luther it was the regular receiving of communion through the Mass and confession of sin through the sacrament of penance that were particularly important as tools whereby the grace of God was accessed on a regular and ongoing basis.

For Luther the system was a living nightmare. It was impossible for him to know the joy of receiving grace

because, no matter how hard he tried, his good works were never 'good enough'. God's grace was therefore unattainable. He kept the rules of his order as diligently as he knew how. He fasted, he prayed, he read and he did everything else he could possibly do that might be thought of as a 'good work' but none of it was good enough. It was all tainted by his sin and shortcomings.

Conscious both of his sin and of God's holiness, Luther felt he was living through Hell itself. If Hell is about suffering, punishment and a sense of forsakenness, then Luther was enduring Hell on earth. On a daily basis he lived with the reality that God was angry with his sin. Looking back later in life, able to reflect with a much stronger affinity with the Scriptures than he had in his twenties, he interpreted his suffering through the lens of David's experience in Psalm 31. He felt an immediate affinity with David who testifies to a life of sorrow and his body wasting away (verse 10). His sin meant that he was cut off from the sight of God (verse 22).

Two years after entering the monastery, Luther was ordained to the priesthood. Far from bringing solutions to the crisis of his faith, this brought only fresh terrors. He now had the responsibility of bringing Heaven to earth through the sacrament of communion. He was afforded a privilege that was not even given to the angels. As he said the words of the Mass the bread and wine were transformed miraculously into the body and blood of Christ and then lifted up as an offering for sin. This was utterly overwhelming. Luther was overpowered by his