

The Life of Luther

Young Luther

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in Eisleben, Germany. Luther's father was a miner who rose from poverty to an important position in the community. He wanted Martin to have a quality education and an honorable profession, so he sent Luther to boarding schools.

In 1501, at the age of 18, Luther entered the University of Erfurt. He received the equivalent of a bachelor's degree in only one and one-half years. In 1505, at the age of 21, Luther completed his master's degree. Doing as his father wished, Luther prepared for law school.

A Plea for Help

As Martin Luther walked back to school one day in 1505, he was caught in a frightening storm. Terrified that the storm was God's punishment for all of his wrongs, Luther prayed, "Saint Anne, mother of Mary, help me and I promise to become a monk." Spiritual problems had frightened him for some time, and the storm was the last straw. He decided to enter a monastery.

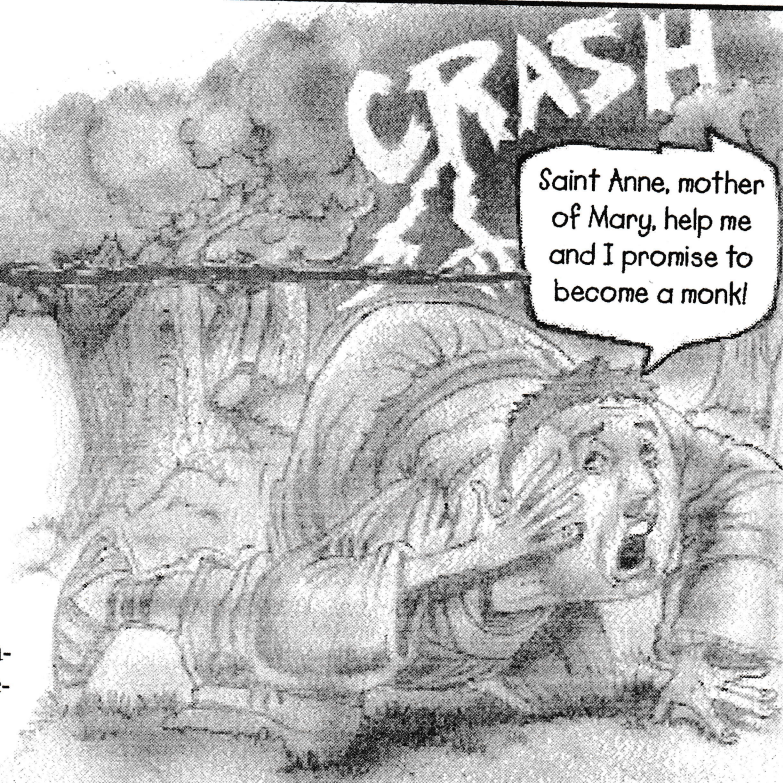
Luther the Priest

While a monk, Luther was chosen to continue his studies. In 1507 he was consecrated as a priest. Luther was terrified of "performing" his first mass. He had been taught that, as a priest, he would be "sacrificing" the body and blood of Christ anew. His inner conflict grew. He believed he was unworthy to have anything to do with a holy God.

The Cost of Forgiveness

Luther noticed that some people had stopped attending worship. They also weren't acting sorry for their sins. When he confronted them, they showed him a letter they had purchased from Johann Tetzel, a seller of indulgences. Luther was angry.

Indulgences were purchased to shorten a



person's time in purgatory. Purgatory was believed to be a place between earth and heaven where a person's actual sinfulness could be cleansed away. The greater the number of sins, the longer the cleansing period in purgatory. The church taught that time in purgatory could be shortened if a person had purchased enough indulgences or if survivors purchased letters of indulgences on behalf of their dead loved ones. The church used the money from the sale of indulgences to finish building St. Peter's Church in Rome.

Luther had been studying about God's gift of faith in Romans and realized God's righteousness was something God offers us only through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ (Romans 3:20-26). Righteousness can't be earned by human deeds. Based on his study, Luther wanted to discuss indulgences and other teachings of the church that were contrary to the teaching of God's Word, so he wrote a series of 95 sentences or theses to discuss. On October 31, 1517, Luther posted his document on the church door for all to see as they went to worship the next day.

God Enables Luther to Take a Stand

Luther's request for a discussion about indulgences enraged Tetzel and other church authorities. Even the pope wanted Luther

silenced. Luther argued against the pope and refused to accept teachings not found in the Bible. The church would not give up any of its power. Finally, in 1521, Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther, who appealed to his friend and government official, Duke Frederick, for help. Later that year, Luther was granted a hearing in a "diet" or meeting of the leaders of the Holy Roman Empire in the city of Worms. Here Luther voiced the memorable words "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me!"

Luther the Teacher and Writer

After the historical meeting at Worms, Luther's life was in danger. On his way home, friends "kidnaped" Luther for his own safety. They took him to the Wartburg castle, where they kept him hidden for almost a year. During this time, Luther translated the New Testament into German so the people could read God's Word. His translation was widely received. (He finished translating the Old Testament in 1534.) In addition to his 95 Theses, sermons, and translations of the Bible, Luther published many books, tracts, hymns, and speeches in defense and celebration of the Christian faith. Luther's Small Catechism, which he prepared for pastors, teachers, and parents, remains one of the oldest and best-known books of religious instruction.

Luther the Family Man

The church taught that workers in the church must remain single. Luther could find no biblical support for

this practice. Many priests, monks, and nuns agreed and began to leave the security of their cloisters. Katharina von Bora was one such nun. In 1525, at the age of 41, Luther married 26-year-old Katharina. Their love grew deep as they lived together and raised a family.

The Legacy of Luther

In his 62 years on earth, Luther lifted up Jesus. He discovered and taught three important themes found in God's Holy Word: People are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, by Scripture alone. For Luther, this simple, wonderful message of the Gospel was clear.

Luther Today

1. When we, like Luther, are called upon to give an account of our faith, why do we need not worry even if we face opposition (Matthew 10:17-20)?

[Jesus will remain with us; His Spirit will provide us with the words to speak.]

2. How does the Spirit want us to share the Good News of the saving Gospel (1 Peter 3:15)?

[With gentleness and respect.]

3. What actions of people today demonstrate a life without the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ?

[Those who evidence a blatant disregard for God and His Word and those trusting in their own self-righteousness ignore God's grace through Christ Jesus.]

To Review and Remember

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. *Ephesians 2:8-9*

Meet Luther's Family

Martin Luther married a former nun, Katie von Bora, in 1525. This surprised some people, because Luther had once said, "No, marriage is not for me. It wouldn't be fair to the woman, for I may be killed at any time. Besides, I'm too busy; I haven't time for a wife." However, it was God's will that Luther have a family. The Luthers' marriage was blessed with six children: Hans, Elisabeth, Magdalena, Martin Jr., Paul, and Margarethe. Elisabeth died before her first birthday. Magdalena died when she was 13. The family was sad to lose their loved ones, but they enjoyed the peace of knowing the girls were in heaven.