

MARTIN LUTHER, EVERYDAY DISCIPLE!

Frightened Child

Martin Luther, for whom the Lutheran church is named, did important things in the history of the church. We know this because five hundred years later we still read his words and talk about him. His childhood, however, was very much like that of other boys in his time, who are long forgotten to us.

When Martin was a child in Germany in the late 15th century, his parents raised him in the Christian faith, as was the practice. They attended church regularly and had devotions at home.

Martin was also raised with the superstitions of the time.

When he gathered firewood with his mother, she told him tales of witches and demons and other evil things that lived in the dark forest. Even the stories of God filled him with fear, because he was taught about the horrible punishment that awaited those who disobeyed God.

Martin knew about punishment. His parents expected obedience from all their children. His mother once beat him until he bled for stealing a nut. Just as parents punished their children, Martin believed that God punished people for their sins. In his early years, no one ever taught Martin about a loving God, who forgives sins.

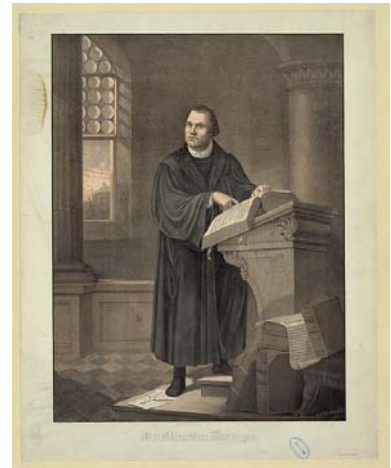
At School

When Martin began school, he soon found it to be another place that punished wrongdoing. A student could be whipped for not knowing his lesson, or for speaking German instead of Latin, the academic language used at that time. Martin, either by studying hard or to escape whippings, was a successful student. As a young teen, he was sent to school in Magdeburg, where he saw a Latin Bible for the first time.

Such was the world of the time—Bibles were handwritten, and scarce. Only universities, monasteries, and churches had Bibles. The Bibles were in Greek or Hebrew, the original languages of the Bible, or Latin; so only those who were well-educated could even read them. The people could not learn about God directly from the Bible, but only by what others told them that the Bible said.

Martin's parents sent him to the university, thrilled that their son would study law, and bring money, and good standing to the family. But Martin had other worries. Through all his studies, he never believed that he was doing enough for God to love him. At that time, people were taught to do good works and give their money to church to get to heaven.

One day, walking back to the university town after visiting his parents, Martin was caught in a violent thunderstorm, and lightning struck close to him. Filled with fear, he



fell to the ground, and promised to become a monk. Perhaps by devoting his life to the service of God, God would forgive him for all his sins.

Enlightened Monk

Even as a monk, Martin continued to study, but now he began to study the Bible more. By the time he was 28, he was a professor at the new University of Wittenberg, lecturing about the Bible to other students much older than he. When Martin lectured on Paul's letter to the Romans, was caught up with the idea the "the just shall live by faith." (Romans 1:17). Martin began to realize that Christians did not have to try to live perfect lives, because God had sent Jesus to die for people's sins, and make them "right" with God.

The church was not teaching this Gospel message. Instead, the church was selling indulgences, pieces of paper that served like a ticket to heaven. Martin, through reading the Bible, now realized that indulgences were not necessary, and didn't want the people to buy them when they needed their money for food and clothing.

So Martin challenged the church, by posting 95 theses, or points of debate, that he wished to discuss. He wanted others to know that God was a loving and forgiving God, and that people didn't need to buy their way into heaven.

Because Luther disagreed with what the church was teaching, he was called to trial. He was asked to take back what he had said, and agree with the teachings of the church. After a night of prayer, he came back to the trial. He explained that unless someone could show him from the Bible where he was wrong, he would not take back what he said. He believed that God's Word should form the way we behave and believe, not other people's teachings.

The church and the government worked together at the time, and Martin Luther was considered an outlaw for disagreeing with the church. As an outlaw, anyone could capture or kill him. On his way back to Wittenberg, he was kidnapped. But the kidnappers turned out to be friends, who hid him away in Wartburg Castle. He grew a beard and dressed as a knight, so no one would recognize him as Martin Luther, the monk who disagreed with the church.

Bible Translator

Some people would have wasted their time spent in hiding--but not Martin. He translated the New Testament into German. Martin wanted everybody to be able to read the Bible for themselves and learn what he had learned about God. So he translated it into the German language that people spoke, so everyone could understand it. Some argue that this was Martin's greatest accomplishment—not only did he put God's Word into the hands of the people, but he also created a standard German language.

Martin returned to Wittenberg, though it was still dangerous for him, to settle disputes among his followers. It was now clear that Martin would never be able to reform, or

change, the church of Rome, so he and his followers formed a church based on what the Bible teaches about God—that God loves us, and we are saved by God’s grace.

Loving Father

Martin got married, and in between preaching, teaching, and writing papers and hymns, he raised a family in the Christian faith. They went to church regularly, sang their father’s hymns, and were taught at home from the catechism that he wrote. The children were not taught about a God who would judge and punish them, but a God who loved them and forgave their sins.

The Luther Rose



As a professor at Wittenberg University, Martin Luther oversaw the creation of his own personal seal. The “Luther Rose”, as it is often called, expressed Luther’s beliefs and teachings.

“First there is a black cross set in a heart of natural color to remind me that faith in the Crucified One saves us.

This heart is mounted in the center of a white rose to show that faith brings joy, comfort, and peace. The rose should be white ... for white is the color of spirits and angels.

The rose is set in a sky-colored field to show that such joy of the spirit and faith is the beginning of the heavenly joy to come, present already in our joy now and embraced by hope, but not yet made manifest.

Around this field is a golden ring, symbolizing that such blessedness in Heaven lasts forever and has no end. Such blessedness is exquisite, beyond all joy and goods, just as gold is the most valuable, most precious and best metal.

This is the summary of my theology.”

Martin Luther portrait by F.W. Wehle, 1882 courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division