

Luther

BIOGRAPHY OF A REFORMER



Frederick Nohl

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A WORD ABOUT GREAT MEN



“We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man without gaining something by him.”

Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish essayist and historian, wrote these words more than 100 years ago. They are as true today as they were then.

Take yourself, for example. You listen to a great man speak. Or you read about him. Or maybe you even talk with him. How this thrills you! And how often this leads you to promise yourself: “I’m going to try my best to be like him”

We all need heroes, great men and women we can look up to and in whose footsteps we can follow. These heroes of ours may be living—a parent, a teacher, an explorer, the mayor of our town, a famous army officer, a jet pilot, a navy nurse. Or they may be dead—dead, that is, except as they live on in our hearts and lives.

The best place to find heroes is in God’s book, the Bible. Here we find the perfect Hero, Jesus Christ, God’s Son and

the world's Savior. Here we also find heroes of the faith who lived their lives for God, men and women like Abraham, David, Daniel, Mary the mother of Jesus, Lydia, and Paul.

But the Bible does not tell about all the great men and women of God. It does not mention all who lived in Bible times. And, of course, many, many Christians have lived and died since the Bible's last chapter was written.

One of these is Martin Luther. Born of humble parents in little Eisleben, Germany, on November 10, 1483, Martin Luther grew up to live an adventuresome, often dangerous life as a man of God. He became a man whose life taught many lessons to others. He became, in other words, one of those great men whom to know is to gain something unusually worthwhile.

Martin Luther still lives on today. He lives on most strongly in the lives of Christians who carry his name—the Lutherans. But he also lives on in the lives of many others throughout the world, for his thoughts and words and actions have helped to make our modern world what it is.

This is the great man, a hero of the faith, whose story I tell in the pages that follow. As you look at Martin Luther, remember that you will not be looking at a god but at a man of God. Not at a perfect man but at an imperfect man, one who knew his own weaknesses and sins only too well. Not at a man who depended on himself but at one who believed that through Christ he could do all things.

And as you look, may you also learn.

Frederick Nohl

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ST. ANNE'S MONK



On July 17, 1505, Martin Luther and a few close friends left the University of Erfurt grounds. Perhaps some traveler noticed the companions arguing with Luther. As the traveler passed the group, he might have caught these words: “Martin, you don’t have to do this. . . . Think of what your father will say. . . . You’ll make such an able lawyer. . . . Don’t throw away your life.”

But Luther’s mind was made up. He had no intention to go back on his words of the day before: “Today you see me for the last time and then no more.”

So Luther said little. Finally the men reached a well-

known group of buildings—the monastery, or cloister, of St. Augustine in Erfurt. Now Luther turned to his friends, shook their hands, spoke a few words of farewell, and left them. With tear-filled eyes they watched him walk slowly through the open gates.

Luther had put behind him the world he could no longer face. He had gone through the gates to a world where he hoped to make peace with God. Martin Luther had decided to become a monk.

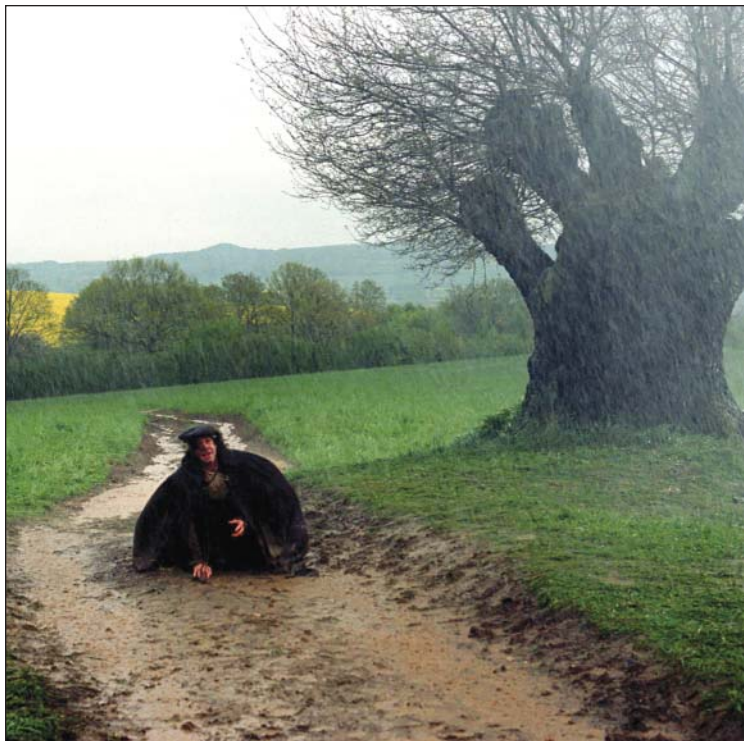


The Troubled Soul

Luther's decision to leave the study of law came suddenly. Yet this decision had beginnings early in his childhood. Luther's parents had taught him to fear the witches, elves, and spirits that supposedly caused storms and disease, tempted men to sin, and stole food from the family supply. His church and its teachers had taught him to fear hell and purgatory and the God who casts men there.

True, the church had also taught Luther how to escape these terrors and to gain the joys of heaven. "God the Son has died for the sins of the world," his teachers had said. "This makes God the Father willing to pardon those who come to Him." But how was the repentant sinner to find the Father? He dared not approach the terrible Judge directly. Even Jesus was often so angry at sin that He would not carry a man's prayers to the Father. "Therefore," Luther's teachers

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“Saint Anne, save me!”

had told him, “ask some of the saints already in heaven to go to Jesus with your prayer for the Father’s forgiveness. And since the saint closest to Jesus is His own mother, Mary, pray to her more than to any other.

“But remember, Martin, just to pray by yourself is not enough. The church has to pray for you too. Even when the priest has asked that you be forgiven, God will not listen unless you do good works. The more gifts you give to the church and to the poor, the more trips you make to Rome and Jerusalem, and the more pleasures you give up, the better will be your chances for heaven. The best and safest way to do all this, and the one that is most God pleasing, is to give up everything and become a monk.”

Luther was not one to forget or treat lightly such matters. He took them seriously, too seriously. Often he had sleepless nights because he felt his sins were still not forgiven. If only he could be sure!

When Luther decided to become a monk, he was simply taking a step that he hoped would clear his conscience of all fear and doubt. It was also a step that certain events in his life had helped him take. For example, in the streets of Magdeburg he once saw a ragged, barefoot, dying prince begging, begging because he believed this would help him earn forgiveness. Luther never forgot the scene. Later in life he said, “Whoever looked at him was deeply moved and felt ashamed of his worldly way of life.”

Another time a close friend of Luther died suddenly. His death troubled Luther deeply. “What if *I* should die?” he asked himself. “Would I be ready? Would I be able to stand before the terrible Judge?”

Then, too, there was that eventful hour early in July 1505. Luther had visited his home in Mansfeld. Now, on a warm and sultry day, he was on his way back to Erfurt. As he walked along, he saw the sky fill with black, racing clouds. Before long he felt raindrops streaking his cheeks. Then a violent storm began. Lightning bolts and thunder filled the heavens with light and noise. Luther was terrified. In his mind he saw visions of raging devils, an angry God, and the terrors of hell prepared for the unforgiven sinner. He fell to the ground and cried: “St. Anne, mother of Mary, save me! I promise to become a monk.”



“Are You, Martin Luther, Ready . . .?”

As a monk Martin Luther would now make his home in a monastery. Monasteries (also called cloisters, chapters, or convents) were the homes of men and women who had left their families and friends to live a quiet, well-ordered, religious life. These people believed that this kind of life would bring them closer to God and preserve them from the sinful world.

The monastery that Luther entered belonged to the Augustinian Order of Hermits. This order, or grouping of monasteries, was founded in Italy in 1287 and was named after St. Augustine, a great monk and bishop (A.D. 354–430).

For the first two months Luther was on trial. Other monks watched him closely, and he was given a chance to



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Luther takes vows as a monk in Erfurt.

think over his decision. But by September 1505, Luther was ready to present himself as a novice, or beginner. The prior, or head of the monastery, stood on the steps of the altar. In the presence of all the monks Luther stepped forward and fell to the floor at the prior's feet.

"What are you looking for?" the prior asked.

"God's grace and your mercy," Luther answered.

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Do you owe anybody any work or money?"

"No."

"Do you have any secret diseases?"

"No."

"The life you are about to take up will be a hard one. You will no longer be able to do as you please, your food will be skimpy, and you will have to wear rough clothes. During the day you will have to work hard and at night you will have to spend long hours in prayer. You will have to fight sin, you can never marry, you will be poor and forced to beg, and you will be lonely. Are you, Martin Luther, ready to accept these hardships?"

"Yes, with God's help, and insofar as human weakness allows."

At these words the choir began to chant. A monk shaved a circle of hair from Luther's head, and another gave him a black skullcap to wear. Luther took off his regular clothes and replaced them with a monk's habit—white robe under a black cloak, both held to the body by a leather belt. Then he knelt before the altar as the prior prayed for him.

When the choir sang the closing hymn, Luther fell flat on the floor, arms outstretched in the form of a cross. After the hymn, Luther's fellow monks welcomed him with a kiss of peace and the prior spoke these final words of warning and encouragement: "Not he that has begun, but he that endures to the end shall be saved."

Luther, clothed in black, had become a monk in the Black Cloister in Erfurt.



Luther Becomes a Priest

Luther was a novice for the first year. During this time he learned all the monastery rules and customs. His little room, or cell, had only a table, chair, and bed. Here he spent many hours alone, praying, reading, meditating. He was allowed to speak only at certain times. Seven times a day Luther joined other monks for worship in the chapel. He helped clean and repair the monastery buildings and grounds. The days passed quietly and quickly. Luther's troubled soul grew more peaceful.

At the end of the year Luther became a full-fledged Augustinian monk. In another special ceremony he again promised to obey God and his superiors, never to marry, and to give up all personal property. Not long after Luther had taken his vows as a monk, the prior picked Luther to become a priest. To prepare himself properly for this work, Luther began long hours of private study. Finally in May

1507 he was ready to celebrate his first Communion service, or Mass.

Among the worshipers was Hans Luther. Although Luther's father was not yet fully pleased with the life his son had chosen, he had come to Erfurt with twenty horsemen. He had also made a gift of \$2,000 to the cloister.

The Mass began. Luther stepped before the altar. He recited the opening parts of the service without difficulty. But suddenly he came to the words, "We offer unto Thee, the living, the true, the eternal God." The idea that he, a sinner, would dare to approach the holy God was too much. Luther thought to himself: "How shall I address God, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up my eyes or raise my hands to God? The angels surround Him. At His nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say, 'I want this; I ask for that'? I am dust and ashes and full of sin, and I am to speak to the living, eternal, and true God." Luther was so terrified that he barely managed to finish the Mass.

Tired and still shaken, Luther joined his father and friends. During dinner he told his father, "My new life is so quiet and godly."

When Hans Luther heard this, his temper rose. "You learned scholar," he said, "have you never read in the Bible that you should honor your father and your mother? And here you have left me and your dear mother to look after ourselves in our old age."

Luther replied: "But, Father, I could do you more good by prayers than if I had stayed in the world. And don't for-

get that a voice from heaven called me to this life when I was in the storm.”

Hans Luther was not convinced. He remarked, “God grant that it was not a trick of the devil.”



Back to School

By this time Luther had been away from the University of Erfurt for two years. Now he returned there to continue his schooling. But he did not go back to study law. Rather he took courses that led to the bachelor of arts in the Bible degree. This degree would permit him to deliver elementary lectures on the Bible.

In the fall of 1508 John Staupitz asked Luther to teach philosophy at the University of Wittenberg, although Luther had not yet finished his course at Erfurt. Staupitz, vicar-general, or leader, of the Augustinian order in Germany, was also dean of the university. He regularly visited the Erfurt cloister and had come to know Luther as a good student and faithful monk. Therefore, when Wittenberg needed a temporary teacher, Staupitz believed Luther could do the job.

Wittenberg, about sixty miles north and seventy miles east of Erfurt, was the main city of Saxony. It had gotten its name, which means “white mountain,” because of the sandy hill nearby. Located on a sharp bend in the Elbe River, this walled city housed about 2,100 people. It was less than a mile long, or about a ten-minute walk. Frederick the Wise,

the Elector of Saxony, considered Wittenberg his prize possession. When he became ruler, he began a building program to improve the city. There, in 1502, he founded a university to be staffed by members of the Augustinian order.

When Luther arrived at the university, he found much of it uncompleted. Law classes met in the elector's castle. Students also went to classes in the partly finished monastery. Only one regular building had been completed. Students and faculty worshiped at the Castle Church. This church was first built in 1343 to house a thorn supposedly from Jesus' crown. However, in 1490 Frederick decided to rebuild the church completely. The work was not finished until 1509 and cost about \$15,000,000.



The Teacher and the Student

Besides teaching his classes, Luther continued his studies. The more he studied the writings of the early church fathers, the less they satisfied him. And the more he studied the Bible, the more he believed that it alone had the final answers to life's problems. Very likely during this first stay at Wittenberg Luther began to sense that God could be found only in the Bible, not in the teachings of men.

Luther also received some comforting advice during this period at Wittenberg. For some time after entering the monastery, Luther's troubled conscience seemed at rest. But then he again began to wonder whether God was really

pleased with him. He fasted for days, he spent sleepless nights in prayer, he beat himself—all to fight the sins that constantly tempted him. Once he locked himself in his room as punishment. A few days later his fellow monks forced the door open and found him unconscious! Yet he did not feel that God loved him or that he was doing enough to be saved.

Even the thought of Christ continued to frighten Luther. As he later said, “The name of Christ often frightened me, and, when I looked on Him and the cross, He seemed to me like a flash of lightning. When people mentioned His name, I would rather have heard the devil mentioned. For I believed that I would have to do good works until they made Christ love and forgive me.”

One day, when Luther felt especially low, an older priest spoke to him in words that Luther never forgot. “Martin,” he said, “don’t you remember the Apostles’ Creed? Don’t you know that it shows that God loved you enough to send His Son to save you? Haven’t you often said, ‘I believe in the forgiveness of sins’? Martin, don’t torture yourself with your sins. Throw yourself into the Savior’s arms—the Savior who died for you!”

In any case, as reward for his thorough study, the University of Wittenberg faculty awarded Luther the bachelor of arts in the Bible degree in March 1509. Seven months later Luther returned to Erfurt, where he taught at the university and at the same time continued his studies. He soon earned a second and then a third graduate degree.

Luther taught and studied at Erfurt for three semesters. Then one day he was told something that made him especially happy: “Luther, you are going to Rome!”

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*Convinced of God's displeasure with him,
Luther spends hours alone in spiritual turmoil.*

The Trip to Rome

To understand why Luther went to Rome, we must first know what was happening to the German Augustinian monasteries. Not all the monks lived the same way. Some monasteries were very strict. Others cared little about following the order's rules. In 1510 Egidio, the general of the whole Augustinian order, ordered all the German monasteries to agree to a new constitution, or set of rules. But some of the strict monasteries, including Luther's, refused to go along. They believed that the new constitution was too weak and that it would cause even the strict monasteries to become careless.

Luther and a fellow professor first went to Halle, not far from Eisleben, to complain to a church leader. But the strict monasteries were not satisfied with a trip to Halle—they felt they had to send representatives directly to the general in Rome. They chose two men, an older monk and Luther. In November 1510 these two started out from Nuremberg for Holy Rome, the Eternal City.

About 850 miles of walking lay ahead of them. Many of the miles were through the windswept mountain passes of the snow-covered Alps. Although warm weather awaited them in Rome, its warmth could not help them as they fought the cold winds of late fall. Fortunately they did not often have to sleep outside. Many monasteries along the way offered travelers a chance to rest and refresh themselves. Southward they traveled for forty days—through Bavaria, across the Swiss mountains, through the Italian cities of Milan and Florence. Finally, at the turn of the year Luther

got his first view of Rome. He threw himself to the ground and said, "Greetings to you, Holy Rome!"

Rome, more than 2000 years old, was a city of some 40,000 people. Once the mighty capital of the great Roman Empire, the city had lost much of its former glory. But Luther cared little about this. He was in Rome to feed and comfort his troubled soul, to carry back with him the blessings it offered to devout pilgrims. Here were seventy monasteries and dozens of churches with their countless relics offering escape from the terrors of purgatory. Here were the catacombs, underground caves where thousands of early Christians were buried. Here lived the cardinals and, above all, the Holy Father, Pope Julius II. What more could a Christian want?

How disappointed Luther became as the days passed by! He and his companion presented their request to General Egidio the day after they arrived. Off and on for four weeks the general discussed the matter with them. But most of the time was their own to do with much as they pleased. Luther visited church after church, saying masses in them whenever he could. On hands and knees he climbed the 28 steps Jesus was supposed to have used when taken before Pilate. He walked through the catacombs and visited the graveyards of the saints.

Luther saw—or thought he saw—many wonderful relics: a crucifix that had once spoken, the chain that had held St. Paul, the grave of the Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well, the rope used to drag Jesus to the cross, eleven thorns from Jesus' crown, a nail from His cross, blood and water from His side, and some hair of the Virgin Mary.



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Relics of all kinds awaited pilgrims in Rome.

He also saw the stone that had sealed Christ's grave, the rope Judas used to hang himself, a few twigs from the burning bush of Moses, and one of the thirty pieces of silver paid Judas for a kiss.

The more Luther saw and heard, the more uncomfortable he began to feel. Were the stories about the crimes of some of the popes and cardinals really true? Why did so many of the priests and monks say Masses so carelessly? Did the relics really release people from the pains of purgatory? Why did some of the priests smile when they saw that he believed in the power of Masses and relics? Why, after climbing the stairs of Pilate and saying an Our Father for his dead grandfather on each, did he think as he reached the last step, "Who knows whether this is true?" Why was he having all these doubts in Holy Rome? Luther still believed that the church was God's but he began to wonder whether all the church taught and did was really pleasing to God.

After four weeks, General Egidio finally reached a decision about the German Augustinian monasteries. "No," he said, "the strict monasteries cannot remain separate. They must join with the others as I have ordered." Their request denied, the two men left Rome and arrived in Nuremberg at the end of March 1511. At Nuremberg Luther left his friend and continued on to Erfurt. Soon he was back to his teaching and his studies.

But he couldn't stop wondering about what he had seen and heard in Rome.



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