

# (Christian History) 12. Martin Luther, Early Years

by David Guzik

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*Martin Luther's early life and experiences shaped his spiritual journey, leading him to become a monk and eventually a key figure in the Protestant Reformation.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 31:1, Matthew 6:33, Romans 1:17

**Topics:** "Reformation History", "Justification By Faith"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the pivotal moment in Martin Luther's life that led to the start of the Reformation. Luther, as an impeccable monk, struggled with a troubled conscience and had no confidence in his own merit to satisfy God. However, through his deep study of the Bible, Luther came to understand that the righteousness of God is received through faith and not through works. This revelation led Luther to feel reborn and experience a gateway into heaven. The speaker also highlights Luther's unwavering love for the Bible and his disappointment in the neglect of Scripture among spiritual leaders.

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## Transcript

In this lecture, we finally make our way to speaking about Martin Luther, who, of course, is one of the great figures in church history. You know, it's the custom of, say, Time magazine, every year, they have a person of the year, right? And so they'll choose a specific person who's made a big impact on society, sometimes either for good or bad, and so they'll put that person usually on the cover of a magazine late in the year and say, this is the person of the year. Then they'll also do sometimes a person of the decade, and I think that when the century ended in the year 2000, they did a person of the century.

I forget who it was. I think they might have said it was Einstein or somebody like that. But if you had to pick a person of the millennium, which single person has influenced the world more than any other single individual? I would argue that's Martin Luther.

I really would. Because not only what he did was an incredible change in Christianity and in the religious world, but it also had extremely powerful effects in government, in economics, in society as general. It's a hugely significant event, the Protestant Reformation.

And of course, Martin Luther's all at the center of that. But of course, we remind ourselves, as the woodcut reminds us up on the screen, that it didn't happen in isolation, right? Luther received something from us,

us received something from Wycliffe, and Luther passed it on to people beyond him. But it all started with Luther in his early life.

Luther was born on November the 10th, 1483, in Eisleben, Germany. The day after his birth was the Feast of St. Martin. So his parents, who are named Hans and Margaretha, they named him Martin.

Luther's father was a miner. He worked the copper mines of Mansfeld, where they had moved at some time after Luther's birth. And he came from peasant stock.

He was successful enough to have started his own copper processing business. And he had a position among the leaders of the people of the small town of Mansfield by the year 1491. These are Luther's parents.

You can see that they look sort of stern and dour. And it's true. That's how they were.

I mean, they were raised in a very difficult age. And they do not seem to be parents who doted a lot of love upon their children, but just were just sort of, you know, parents, I should say, typical of that time. Luther's few recollections of his childhood that have survived reflect a, what you might call a somber religious life, in a very strict discipline that was common for that age.

His schooling seems to be somewhat remarkable. He went to the Latin school at Mansfield, and then he spent a year at a school in Magdeburg, run again by the Brethren of the Common Life, which was this medieval lay group dedicated to Bible study and education. And then when he was 15 years old, he went to Eisenach, where he sort of went to the very next level in his education.

Eisenach is a city where Luther came, and he ended up actually moving in with a fairly wealthy family and living in a house that's memorialized still to this day in Eisenach called the Luther House. The story goes that Luther and his schoolmates had very little money, and they had very little food, and they used to go around sort of as beggars, more like street-performing beggars. They would go through the streets and sing.

They would go up to a door, sing songs for the people, and hope for some goodies from the people. Well, as the story goes, Luther came to the house of this one remarkable, somewhat noble family, and the woman, the mother of the family, was so taken with Luther, just the way that he looked, just with the excellence of his singing voice, that they really doted upon him, and she ended up bringing him into their home. I think in some ways this story is sort of oversold, because a lot of people want to use this whole account of the period that Luther spent with his more wealthy, cultured, and connected family as a way to explain his later impact on the world.

You see, a lot of people have trouble believing that the son of a miner, the son of very common people, could really change the world the way that Luther did. They sort of had to connect him with some kind of wealth or status or influence, and so I think it's possible for people to overemphasize this particular account from Martin Luther's life. Anyway, when he was done at Eisenach, he began what his father wanted him to do.

You see, Martin Luther's father wanted his son, who was very intelligent, to be a lawyer. And so at the age of 18, in the spring of 1501, Luther went away to the University of Erfurt. Now Erfurt at that time was one of the oldest and most popular universities in Germany, and there he talked long enough and seriously enough to where he was nicknamed the philosopher.

He learned how to play the lute, which was sort of a medieval guitar. He distinguished himself in study, eventually earning a Master of Arts degree in a day when very few people went that far in their scholarly studies. Now it was at Erfurt, I believe when he was about 20 years old, when Luther saw his very first Bible.

He was 20 years old before he had even seen a Bible, but as he saw it, he was deeply stirred. He read it, and one of the first things he read was the story of Hannah and Samuel, and especially the way that the Lord called to Samuel, and it had a very special impact on him. You see, like many parents of his time, Luther's father had great hopes for his son, and he wanted him to be a lawyer, so he paid his university expenses.

He paid for the expensive textbooks, and then he was very supportive of his son's education and wanted him to go on to the next step of law school. So in 1505, when Luther had just finished university and when he was 22 years old, several events spoke to him. First, a friend of his was killed in a fight, and he wondered, what if it had been me instead of my friend? Secondly, as he was traveling along one day riding a horse, he had a dagger attached to his belt, and the dagger accidentally cut into his leg and it severed a fairly significant artery.

Luther started bleeding like crazy. He cried out to the Virgin Mary for help, and he was able to survive that accident of the accidental cut in his leg. But the third event is held by most people to be the most critical.

The third event, as Luther was riding his horse near the village of Schotterheim, a severe thunderstorm frightened his horse, and his horse threw him. He fell to the ground in terror because of the thunderstorm and because of the accident being thrown from his horse, and he cried out to Saint Anne. Now, why Saint Anne? Saint Anne was the patron saint of miners and probably had a special place in the Luther home.

And he vowed to Saint Anne, if you help me to live through this, if you'll save me, I vow to you that I'll become a monk and enter a monastery. So he became an Augustinian monk just at the time when he was poised to actually be one of the great young legal minds of Europe. His father was beside himself.

He couldn't believe that his son was giving all his future away, all the money that the father had invested in the son's education and in the son's future, he couldn't believe that his son was throwing it all away to become a monk. But Martin Luther was stubborn enough to do it, and he went into the monastery. Martin Luther, even though he was a monk, he still had a very sharp legal mind.

And that legal mind helped him to appreciate his own sense of guilt before God. He would often speak with his mentor at the monastery, the leader of the Augustinian order in Erfurt, Johann von Staupitz. Now, sometimes Staupitz would get very frustrated as Luther would come to confession.

Luther would come to confession and begin confessing every trivial sin. Because for Luther, there was no such thing as a small sin before a great God. So you can just picture this scene in your mind, right? It's confession time and the monks are always supposed to go to confession, right? This is part of the good Roman Catholic life, so a monk should do it.

So Luther sits down in the confessional and there's his confessor, this godly man of the monastery, Johann von Staupitz. And there he is before this man and he's confessing his sin. And Luther starts going on and on with the littlest sins that 10,000 other people wouldn't think to confess.

And you can just imagine what it's like for von Staupitz there in the confessional booth. He's just getting tired and going, Luther, it's reported that one time Staupitz became so frustrated with Luther in the confessional that he told him, go out and do some real sinning and then come back here. Well, Luther had a torment within his soul.

You could say that it was his spiritual, I'm going to throw a German word on you, his spiritual anfestung. Anfestung is just sort of this dark terror or gloominess that comes over a person. And this spiritual anfestung was the result of three things.

The first, he had a good mind which could properly analyze things. Second, he knew that he was a sinner and that God was righteous. Third, he understood the idea of righteousness or I should say the righteousness of God through medieval theologians and not through the Bible.

You see, the phrase, the righteousness of God, like most biblical terms had been reinterpreted by scholastic theologians of the high and late Middle Ages. If you want to take the term grace and faith and justification and then also the phrase, the righteousness of God, all of these terms were essentially redefined by the scholastic theologians. You see, essentially they reinterpreted that phrase, the righteousness of God, to support a theology of law and works.

For centuries the church had taught that the righteousness of God was God's active personal righteousness by which he punishes or judges the unrighteous sinner. So if the righteousness of God is that quality within himself that bestows judgment upon you, right, then how does it make you feel to hear that God is righteous if you're a sinner? You don't want to hear that, right? You shy away from it. The righteousness of God, that's what condemns me.

You don't like to hear about the righteousness of God even though you know it's true because you know that you're a sinner. And this is what Luther tells us is what he learned. Therefore, whenever he came across the phrase, the righteousness of God in scripture, he says he felt a little terror within his heart.

He said, it struck my conscience like lightning or like it was a thunderbolt in my heart, he says in another place, because he knew that he was an unrighteous sinner who fell far short of God's righteous, God's perfect demands. Therefore, even in the monastery, Luther felt anger and hatred towards God. This is what he says.

He said, I did not love. Yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinner. Luther felt, look, is it not enough that God crushes us miserable sinners with his law? Now he threatens us with punishment through the gospel of wells, because the Bible says that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God.

And whenever Luther heard that phrase, he thought about it the way that medieval theologians did. And he said, the righteousness of God can only send me to hell. Now, in order to make himself right before God, he ended up following the general idea of the and he went on a strict program of fastings and beatings and self abasement.

This is what Luther says about that period in his life. He says, I was a good monk, and I kept to the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I all the brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I would have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading and other work.

He went on in another work to say, actually, it's the same work. It's from the commentary of Galatians that he wrote. He says, I, too, may say that before I was enlightened by the gospel, I was zealous for the epististical laws and traditions of the fathers as any man was.

I tried to live up to every law the best I could. I punished myself with fastings, watchings, prayings and other exercises more than all those who today hate and persecute me. It was I was so much in earnest that I imposed on my body more than it could stand.

Going on in his commentary in Galatians, this is what else he says. He says, I crucified Christ daily in my cloistered life, and I blasphemed God by my wrong faith. Outwardly, I kept myself chased, poor and obedient.

I was giving to fasting, watching, praying, saying amasses and the like. Yet under the cloak of my outward respectability, I continually mistrusted, doubted, feared, hated and blasphemed God. My righteousness was a filthy puddle.

Satan loves such saints. They are his darlings, for they quickly destroy their body and soul by depriving them of the blessings of God's generous gifts. And then one more quote again from this same commentary on Galatians.

He says, I tell you, I stood in awe of the Pope's authority. To dissent from him, I considered a crime worthy of eternal death. I thought of John Hus as a cursed heretic.

I counted it a sin to even think of him. I would have gladly furnished the wood to burn him. I would have felt that I had done God a real service.

Okay, so you understand this? Luther was not a half-hearted Roman Catholic. He was not a half-hearted monk. He gave himself over to it completely.

Well, of course, in the training of his monastic vows and of his monastic order, it meant that Luther would become a priest. And becoming a priest, you know, sort of your inauguration into the priesthood, is when you say your very first mass. And in the year 1507, Luther was ordained as a priest.

He took holy orders as the sacrament that the Roman Catholic Church calls it. And he said his first mass. He describes it as an utterly terrifying experience.

Because again, Luther was a logical man. He wasn't a man who could say, oh, who cares? He thought about things. And when he thought about what it meant to hold the body of Christ in his hands, he says that he was terrified.

And he embarrassed himself and his father, who had come to visit him and to see him perform his first mass. He said it was a terrible, traumatic, embarrassing experience. You can only imagine how Luther's father felt after that.

Well, in the year 1510, Luther visited Rome, and he was very disillusioned by the kind of mechanical faith that he found there. He did everything he could to please God. It is said that he even climbed up Pilate's stairs, where Jesus supposedly walked in his trial before Pilate.

It was said that the staircase was miraculously transported from Jerusalem to Rome. And anybody climbed up it on their bare knees, they would receive forgiveness of sins. Luther prayed and kissed each

step as he walked up on his knees.

But then even then, the whole scene gave him no peace and doubts were brewing. Some people say later, and I don't know if this can be confirmed, that Luther went up those steps on his knees, but he became so disgusted by the spectacle that he got up off his knees and he walked down in demonstration. I don't know if that's true or just a legend, but that's what some people say.

You see, that's not the way Luther was prepared in his heart to receive the city of Rome. You can only imagine what it was like for such a committed Roman Catholic to go and visit Rome for the first time, right? He was absolutely delighted. It would be like for somebody else to visit Jerusalem or Israel for the first time.

Can you imagine the excitement? And when Luther came to Rome, when he saw the city from a distance, he dropped to his knees and cried out, Hail Holy Rome, three times holy for the blood of the martyrs shed there. But when he left the city, he was disillusioned and he said, If there is a hell, Rome is built over it. Later on, he said, I would have not have missed seeing Rome for a hundred thousand gold pieces.

I should have always felt an uneasy doubt whether or not I was doing an injustice to the Pope. As it is, I'm quite satisfied that I'm fair to him. You see, this is another thing he said about his visit to Rome.

He said, I remember that when I went to Rome, I ran about like a madman to all the churches, all the convents and all the places of note of every kind. I implicitly believed every tale about them and all the lies that were invented about them. I said a dozen masses, and I almost regretted that my father and mother were not dead, so that I could have availed myself of the opportunity to draw their souls out of purgatory by a dozen or more masses and other good works of similar descriptions.

We did these things then knowing no better. It is the Pope's interest to discourage such lies. Well, he returned after his trip to Rome.

He returned to Wittenberg, to Germany. He began his career as a professor and a Bible teacher in Wittenberg. Now, compared to Erfurt, Wittenberg was a small and unimportant town.

The university there was just beginning. And when he came to Wittenberg, one of the important churches there was the Schlosskirche, the castle church called the Church of All Saints, and it was closely connected with the university and with sort of the prince over that area, the Elector of Saxony, Frederick III the Wise. And this man, this ruler over the area, Frederick III or Frederick the Wise, he generously supported both the university and the church.

And so Luther at the university actually became a great Bible teacher. At the university, he taught verse by verse through the Psalms. He taught verse by verse through Romans.

He taught verse by verse through Galatians and verse by verse through the book of Hebrews. And this is something that many people just sort of, well, they don't really stop and consider about Luther. They don't realize how much he loved the Bible.

Matter of fact, he loved the Bible in a way that was far from typical for the 16th century. You know, in our day, people read their Bibles every day. The Bible is available in hundreds of versions.

People are encouraged to read their Bible, but that's not how it was in the days of Luther. As I remind you, he never even saw a Bible until he was 20 years old. And then that was in the university library at Erfurt.

And again, you should know that this general attitude of not having regard for the Bible that was there in medieval culture was the same among theologians. You see, the Bible was rarely directly studied by theologians. Luther complained that both in the monasteries and in the universities, the Bible was seldom read directly.

And instead, it was usually just interpreted by commentaries or by what other people said or taught about it. In all of this, or in view of all of this, Luther's love for the Bible was remarkable. That love for the Bible was first sort of struck out when he was in his first year in the monastery.

Because when you entered in the monastery during the period that they called your novitiate, your time of training as a monk before you become a full-fledged monk, when he came into the monastery in the first year of his novitiate, they gave him a Bible. And for the first year, you could study the Bible. After your first year, they took the Bible away from you because they had to give it to another novitiate, and they gave you other books to study.

Luther loved that first year when he had a Bible of his very own. He says that he practically memorized where everything was on every page. Later on, Luther said that he had read the Bible so thoroughly that he knew where everything was on every page of that Bible.

When a passage was mentioned, he knew immediately where to find it. This is what he said. He said, if I had kept at it, I would have become exceedingly good at locating things in the Bible.

At that time, no other study pleased me so much as sacred literature. With great loathing, I read other things, and my heart was aglow when the time came to turn back to the Bible. He said, I read the Bible diligently.

Sometimes one statement from the Bible occupied my thoughts for a whole day. But at the end of that first year of Luther's novitiate, they took the Bible away from him, and he had to study other subjects. But the monks were given a psalter, an addition of the psalms, because they had to sing the psalms every day.

Luther had virtually memorized the psalms, and he wore that little psalter, the Book of Psalms, to shreds. And again, he made himself familiar with the Bible by reading it over and over again. His appetite for the Word of God was unusual.

Many years later, in the year 1532, Luther would say this. He said, for some years now, I have read through the Bible twice every year. If you picture the Bible to be a mighty tree and every word a little branch, I have shaken every one of these branches, because I wanted to know what it was and what it meant.

And throughout his adult life, even though he read the Bible so many times, Martin Luther continued to have an incredible love for the Bible. He was never content with previous readings and previous insights. He always wanted to understand it better.

Now, because of this, Luther was constantly discouraged that his fellow Germans seemed to be bored with the Bible. And so he says this even about the neglect of the Bible among spiritual leaders. He says, the neglect of the Scripture, even by spiritual leaders, is one of the greatest evils in the world.

Everything else, arts or literature, is pursued and practiced day and night, and there is no end of labor and effort. But Holy Scripture is neglected as though there were no need of it. Those who condescend to read it want to absorb everything at once.

There has never been an art or a book on earth that everyone has so quickly mastered as the Holy Scriptures. He's speaking sarcastically here. But its words are not, as some think, mere literature, that's in German, *lessewort*.

They are words of life, *lebewort*, intended not for speculation and fancy, but for life and action. But why complain? No one pays any attention to our lament. May Christ our Lord help us by His Spirit to love and honor His Holy Word with all our hearts.

Now, again, you have to say this was something very, very radical in the life of Martin Luther, and something that sets him apart from the people of his day, but sets him clearly in the camp of other people whom God used mightily, right? Haven't we seen this consistently time and time again? People make an impact when they love their Bibles, when they teach their Bibles. That was exactly it for Luther. It is no secret or it's no mystery that God used Martin Luther so greatly because he had his love for the Bible, and in his university studies, he was a verse-by-verse Bible teacher.

But again, you have to remember that he came to the Bible with a medieval framework of theology. And so, about the year 1514, as Luther was lecturing through the Book of Psalms, he lectured through the Book of Psalms at the University of Wittenberg between 1513 and 1515, he came across a troubling text. The text was Psalm 31-1, and this is what it reads.

In you, O Lord, I put my trust. Let me never be ashamed. Okay, well, that's easy to understand, right? But here's the next phrase.

Deliver me in your righteousness. Luther was a man who was intelligent and thought carefully about what the words of Scripture said, right? And so when it said, deliver me in your righteousness, that made some problems for Luther. Luther wondered, how can God's righteousness ever deliver me? He felt that the righteousness of God only condemned him.

Do you understand what a turning point this was for Luther? He's looking at this passage, he's teaching verse by verse through the Book of Psalms, and it says right there, in your righteousness deliver me. And he goes, the righteousness of God doesn't deliver me. The righteousness of God only condemns me.

Because he was thinking of that phrase, the righteousness of God, in the medieval scholastic framework that said the righteousness of God is the quality in God by which he judges guilty sinners, right? You can talk about the righteousness of the law, and that's what judges guilty sinners. That's exactly what Luther thought. And so this verse from Psalm 31 1 bothered him greatly.

He kept turning it over again and again in his head. What does this mean? How can I understand this? Where is this going to lead me? But then he came to the connection between Psalm 31 1 and Romans 1 17. Remember Romans 1 17? It talks about the righteousness of God.

It says, for in it, what's the it there? The gospel. For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, the just shall live by faith. Now under his old understanding of righteousness, that verse really bothered Luther because he says the gospel reveals the righteousness of God.

He goes, great. The law condemns me, and now the gospel condemns me because it always brings me back to the righteousness of God, and it's the righteousness of God that condemns me. But when he read the verse again, he noticed that it said the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, the just shall live by faith.

Luther came to understand the gospel in Romans 1. He was able to compare his discovery with the rest of scripture from memory precisely because he had spent so many years carefully reading and teaching the Bible. And that's immediately why he knew, wait a minute, a whole new window opened up to him. He understood that that phrase, the righteousness of God in the New Testament, it does not describe that character or that quality within God that's responsible for the judgment of guilty sinners.

No, it describes the righteousness that God gives to guilty sinners by faith. And when Luther understood that, it changed everything for him. Suddenly he realized that the righteousness of God was not there to condemn him, but the righteousness of God received by faith was there to justify him.

And just as much as before, his brilliant legal mind led him to know that he was absolutely a guilty sinner who had very little hope of salvation. Now his legal mind helped him to understand that if God said he was justified by his righteousness, then he was certainly justified. This is how Luther puts it in a very, very wonderful and dramatic statement.

He says, My situation was that although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would satisfy him. Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement, the just shall live by faith. Then I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith.

Therefore, I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven. There it was right there.

At that moment or sometime along that place, you could say that Martin Luther was born again. He says he felt himself going through open doors into paradise, a gateway into heaven. Now you can really say that this right here, this is where the Reformation began.

Because as much as anything what Martin Luther was, Martin Luther was a man who was profoundly changed. When you contrast him with his absolutely guilt-ridden torment, again, not fostered in his mind because of some theological or psychological sickness, but because he understood theology, he understood himself, and he had the legal brilliance to figure out that the two resulted in him going straight to hell. But when he understood this biblical truth that basically, we must say, had been lost by medieval theologians as he said it was like the doors of heaven opening up to him.

Again, let's remember, what was the medieval Roman Catholic conception? Some might argue it's the present Roman Catholic conception as well, but let's just talk about it in the historical framework. What was the Roman Catholic framework for how a person is saved? You're saved by the church, right? The church dispenses grace to you for salvation. And how does the church dispense this grace to you? Through the sacraments, right? And therefore, all you have to do is receive these outward sacraments, and you can know that you are saved.

But the problem is, do people recognize the disconnect, right? They recognize, here's an utterly wicked, ungodly man, his life is filled with corruption, and he shows very little regard for God. But you know what? He was baptized, he takes communion, he goes to confession every once in a while, you know, he has enough of the sacraments to be able to say, well, I'm going to heaven. But you look at his life, and there's no evidence of any kind of change of life, or love of God, or trust of God.

But according to that medieval Roman Catholic framework, well, he's going to heaven. You check off the boxes, this sacrament, this sacrament, this sacrament, apparently he's received enough grace, he's going to heaven. But how do you the ones that tormented Luther, and why you see that his understanding, quite accurately, of the biblical idea of justification by faith, and by the way, by faith alone, this ends up being the big distinction.

We'll talk about that a little bit more later, but I should just touch on it now. If you were to ask a Roman Catholic back in Luther's day, or even today, are you justified by faith? They would say, absolutely yes. The issue isn't between justified by faith or not justified by faith.

The issue is, are you justified by faith alone? And to that, the Roman Catholic theologian, or the Roman Catholic person who understood the doctrine, could not answer, yes, I am saved by faith alone. Well, this was the huge turning point for Martin Luther, and this was the spiritual revolution that took place within him that enabled him to do the amazing things that God used him to do within the Reformation. And so, that's the beginning story of Martin Luther.

In our next lecture, we're going to talk about what he did after this point, and how he came to the flashpoint of the Reformation, the whole issue over the selling of indulgences. We'll consider that together, as I said, in our next lecture together.

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