

# **Martin Luther: From Birth to His Conversion (1463-1516)**

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

---

Reformation Men and Theology, Lesson 3 of 11

---

## I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Martin Luther was a unique person and may be classified as a genius — he was an intellect, teacher, preacher, musician, poet, leader of men; he was courageous and had a dynamic personality. In spite of his excellent education, he was rough and crude at times. He was a “bull in a china shop,” and his pen smoked hot against his opposition. It took this kind of explosive, dynamic personality to be a catalyst for the Reformation. Luther was God’s man for the hour, and there will probably never be another one quite like him.
  
- B. Luther’s whole life was one of struggle. He had to fight for everything, and this affected him profoundly, both positively and negatively. Towards the end of his life he became more difficult to live with. In fact, he was somewhat obnoxious and “a bear.” This does not mean that he was not dedicated to Christ in those last years, for he was. But years of struggle affect a person’s thinking. NOTE: Some have said that Luther died in great depression as a hopeless alcoholic, but this is sheer rumor from men who hated him.

## II. HIS STRUGGLE IN EARLY LIFE

- A. Luther was born November 10, 1483, the son of a poor miner. He knew the struggles and the outlook of the working class. His father slaved and saved to put his son through college to study law. His mother had to carry wood on her back from the forest. Luther said his parents “worked their flesh off their bones” to raise seven children. Luther was not ashamed of his background, and would say with great pride, “I am a peasant’s son, my father, grandfather, all my ancestors were genuine peasants.”
- B. Luther had a difficult youth, being brought up under stern discipline. It is true that he had an impetuous temper and a stubborn will which needed correction, but his parents sometimes abused discipline. His mother beat him for stealing a nut until the blood came. His father once flogged him so hard that he had a temporary grudge against his father. Luther later realized the good intentions of his parents but questioned their wisdom. He said,
- “My parents treated me with great harshness which has made me very timid . . . They believed with all their hearts that they were doing right; but they could not discriminate between minds differently constituted, so as to know when, on whom and how punishment ought to be inflicted.”
- C. In his early schooling he learned the Catechism, the Ten Commandments, the Apostle’s Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and several Latin and German hymns. He was, however, somewhat

of a discipline problem. Once he was whipped by his teacher no less than fifteen times in one single school day.

- D. Later he attended school in Eisenach because he lacked money and hoped that nearby relatives would help him make it in school. Unfortunately, they were not particularly interested, so Luther was forced to sing and beg for bread at age fourteen. Just when it looked as though he would have to discontinue his education, Frau Ursula Cotta, the wife of a wealthy merchant, took an interest in him and provided for his education. Luther called this woman his “adopted mother.” NOTE: It was during this time that Luther learned to play the flute and the lute. He also had a beautiful singing voice.
- E. He attended Erfurt University at age 18 in 1501 where he came under the influence of John Wessel, the Christian humanist. He had an insatiable quest for knowledge, mainly for the Aristotelean philosophy of the Middle Ages. He was trained in logic, rhetoric, physics and metaphysics. Luther was a brilliant law student, fond of music and philosophy. He received his M.A. degree in 1505.
- F. All the time that he was at the university, Luther was a devout Roman Catholic and felt a need for religious development. He began every day with prayer, and visited the church once a day. Whatever hours he had free, he would spend in the university library studying. There he discovered for the first time a whole Bible in Latin. Before this he had only seen fragments of the Gospels and Epistles. He read with great interest, and said, “O, if God could give me such a book of my own.

- G. While at the university, Luther contracted a dangerous illness. Death stared him in the face and filled him with solemn thoughts. He was not prepared to die, for he had not yet found salvation. Luther confided in a very old priest, "I shall soon be recalled from this world." The old man kindly answered, "Cheer up, my dear bachelor, you will not die of this illness. Our God will yet make of you a man, who in his turn shall console many. For God lays his cross on those he loves; and those who bear it patiently gain much wisdom." These words revived Luther's spirit and he lived.
- H. During this same period Luther lost a close companion named Alexis. Divergent reports claim that Alexis was killed either by assassination or by a thunderbolt while at Luther's side. In either case, Luther was shocked and frightened, for he was still not ready to die. The question "What would happen to me if I were suddenly carried away?" terrified him.

### III. HIS STRUGGLE WITH HIMSELF

- A. Much to everyone's surprise, at age 21 Luther became an Augustinian monk. Luther may well have been a lawyer were it not that on a certain day in the year 1505 he was very nearly killed by a thunderbolt that struck him to the ground during a terrifying storm. In his fear, he prayed, "Help me, St. Anne!" Having come face to face with death again, he proved still to be unready for it. He was deeply convicted, and vowed if the Lord would deliver him from this danger, he would abandon the world and devote himself to God. NOTE: God can, in His providence, use a thunderbolt to get men where He wants them.

- B. Luther invited all of his university friends to one last party, and there explained to them his intention to live the monastic life. He entered the monastery with only the clothes on his back and two secular books: Virgil and Plautus. He as yet had no Bible. NOTE: Luther became a monk in order to find salvation, not because he had salvation. He felt that good works would save his soul. NOTE: Luther's father was disappointed with him, and violently opposed his entering the monastery.
- C. When he first entered the convent, Luther assumed the most menial tasks to subdue his pride; he swept the floor, begged bread through the streets, and submitted without a murmur to the ascetic severities.
- D. In 1507 he began to study Roman Catholic theology, and by age 26 he held an important position on the faculty of Erfurt University. Luther was also studying Augustine's theology on the corruption of the will and divine grace. He finally found a Bible and made it his own. This Bible was chained to the wall in the monastery. He spent hours studying, meditating and praying over the Holy Scriptures.

#### IV. HIS STRUGGLE WITH HIS SOUL

- A. Luther was acutely conscious of his own sinfulness, and knew that God was a vengeful God. He initially entered the monastery to achieve holiness, but he never found it in himself even though his teachers said that he could strive and be victorious over sin. His Pelagian (freewill) teachers told him to fast, pray and work for salvation. For three years he sought for holiness and freedom from sin by mortifying the flesh. He shut himself up in a cell with water and little food, and through

fasting, macerations and watchings sought to gain holiness. He said of this time,

“I torment myself to death to procure peace with God for my troubled heart and my agitated conscience; but I was surrounded by horrible darkness, and could find peace nowhere.”

No one surpassed Luther in his outward, external desire for holiness. He later claimed of his efforts, “If ever a monk got to heaven by monkery, I would have gotten there.”

- B. Luther looked at his sinful Saxon soul and had a tremendous inner conflict. He wearied his instructors about how to achieve holiness, and kept the priests in confession for hours at a time. He was miserable.
- C. One day Luther became so overwhelmed with his sin that he fell into extreme depression and locked himself in his cell for several days and nights. Becoming concerned when he heard no movement in the cell, another monk knocked on the door but heard no answer. He broke the door open and found Luther stretched on the floor unconscious and without a sign of life. He was only revived when some choir boys began to sing, but his soul was still in a state of unrest. He then began to study the Psalms and Paul’s Epistles with renewed zeal.
- D. These early days in the monastery were difficult for Luther because he found no rest for his soul. One monk, John Staupitz, a true believer, reminded Luther that God was love and that God was not angry with him — but Luther was angry with God. Staupitz told Luther such things as,

“Look to the wounds of Jesus Christ, to the blood he has shed for you; it is there that God’s grace will appear to you. Instead of making yourself a martyr for your sins, cast yourself into the arms of the Redeemer. Confide in him, in the justice of his life, in the expiation of his death. Do not draw back; God is not irritated against you, it is you who are irritated against God. Listen to the Son of God. He became a man to give you the assurance of divine favor; he says to you, ‘Thou art my sheep; thou hearest my voice; no one shall snatch thee from my hand.’”

“There is no true repentance except that which begins with the love of God and of righteousness. To be filled with love for that which is right, you must first be filled with love to God. If you wish to be converted, do not give yourself to these mortifications, and try to make yourself a martyr. Love him who hath first loved you.”

Apparently, none of this good advice helped Luther at this time. However, Luther later said of Staupitz that he “first caused the light of the gospel to shine in the darkness of his heart.” NOTE: Luther and Staupitz’ relationship cooled off when the Reformation came. Staupitz vehemently opposed division of the Catholic Church.

- E. Staupitz sent Luther to Rome in 1510 to visit the Vatican and the Shrines. While on pilgrimage to Rome, Luther contracted a disease in Bologna. Again, he was not ready to die. He recovered from the illness and continued his journey. When he first caught a glimpse of Rome, he fell flat on his face and

exclaimed, “Hail to thee, holy Rome! Thrice holy for the blood of martyrs shed here.” Coming into the city, he “ran like a crazy saint” through all the churches and crypts and catacombs with unquestioning faith in the legendary traditions about the relics and miracles of martyrs. In order to win favor with God, he climbed the *Scala Santa*, the stairway which was said to be the one which Jesus had climbed to reach Pilate’s judgment hall. Tradition claims that halfway up the stairs Luther got off his knees and walked down, but this is unlikely because he was so dedicated to the Church’s traditions at the time. NOTE: The flippant attitude of the priests in spiritual things disgusted Luther. They would hurry through the mass. Other priests could do seven masses in the time it took Luther to do one, and used to say things to him like, “Hurry up and send her Son home to our Lady.” He would hear priests mumbling to themselves when giving the elements in the sacrament, “Bread thou art, and bread thou shalt remain; wine thou art, and wine thou shalt remain.” In fact, there was such disgust for the Roman Church in Rome itself that it was commonly said, “If there is a hell, Rome is built on it; it is an abyss that sends forth all kinds of sins.” NOTE: Much of what Luther saw and heard at Rome shocked him, for religious and moral conditions were very low. However, at this time his faith in the Holy Mother Church was not shaken. Later, after his conversion, he admitted it was easier to expose the corruption of Rome, having seen the place for himself. This visit eased his conscience when he attacked popery as “an institution of the devil.”

## V. HIS STRUGGLE FOR SALVATION

- A. After returning from Rome, Luther received his Doctorate in Theology in 1512 and took an oath: “I swear to defend the

gospel of truth with all my might.” The doctors degree was conferred upon him by Carlstadt, the dean of the Faculty of Theology who readily admitted that he had never seriously read the scriptures.

- B. Luther’s conversion came sometime between 1512 and 1516. He kept asking how he could find a gracious God. He knew the righteousness, justice and terrors of a God of wrath, but not his love, mercy and grace.
- C. He was on the faculty of the University of Wittenberg, lecturing and preaching daily. Through the preparation of his messages on Romans and Psalms, the light dawned on Luther that men are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, apart from any human efforts or works. Reflecting on his time reading and praying, he said,

“I labored diligently and anxiously as to how to understand Paul’s words in Romans 1:17 where he says, ‘The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel.’ I saw the difference, that law is one thing and gospel another. I broke through, and as I had formerly hated the expression ‘the righteousness of God,’ I now began to regard it as my dearest and most comforting word, so that this expression of Paul’s became to me in very truth a gate to paradise.”

NOTE: What Luther had come to learn was that justification is by grace through faith in Christ. Luther had met the resurrected Christ and was gloriously saved.

- D. Around the age of 32, Luther was finally converted to Christ. He now began to preach the gospel with power, and men began to listen. Luther's life became Christ-centered:

“In my heart the faith in my Lord Jesus Christ reigns, and ought to reign alone. This is the beginning, the middle, and the end of all my thoughts.”

At this time, Luther became very evangelistic in his approach to men, and sought to bring them to Christ. He said to one of his friends,

“O my dear brother, learn to know Christ, and Christ crucified. Learn to sing to him a new song, to despair of yourself, and to say to him, ‘Thou, Lord Jesus, Thou art my justice, and I am thy sin: thou has taken what is mine, and hast given me what is thine.’ You will find no peace but in him, despairing of yourself, and your works, and learning with what love he opens his arms to you, taking on him all your faults, and giving you all his justice.”

NOTE: At this point in his life, Luther was a true Christian, but he was also a sincere Catholic. He was converted, but still had ignorance and superstition in his religion.