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HISTORICAL PERSECUTION OF BELIEVERS – LESSON 10

MARTIN LUTHER – REFORMATION BEGINS

Throughout the centuries of the Dark Ages and Medieval Times, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) constantly persecuted any Christ-followers who did not bow to their theocratic rulership, doctrine, traditions, and practices. Whenever a group of any significant number emerged, an inquisition was held to identify and exterminate them. Such activity greatly increased in the sixteenth century with the rise of the Protestant Reformation triggered through Martin Luther.

Luther was ordained as a Roman Catholic Priest in 1507. As he diligently studied scripture, which was only available in Latin, he came to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ and Paul's writings in the Epistles. He clearly saw how the RCC doctrine and teachings deviated greatly from the written inspired word of God. The RCC was itself deep into unbiblical practices, doctrines, and traditions.

Luther wrote his Ninety-five Theses pointing out the discrepancies. In 1517 he posted it openly for all to see, and it started a great furor. In 1520 Luther refused the demand of Pope Leo X to renounce his writings, choosing rather to stand by scripture. At the Diet of Worms, Germany in 1521 Luther was excommunicated by the Pope and condemned as an outlaw by the Holy Roman Emperor.

The Holy Roman Empire was seen as the legal successor to the Roman Empire which had fallen in the fifth century. It was headed by the Pope both religiously and politically. The Pope appointed the "Emperor" who then owed his allegiance to the Pope. In this manner, the Pope had considerable power over all the Kings of Europe for over one thousand years (5th to 16th centuries).

The RCC thus amassed great wealth, exercised tremendous political power, and used fear to control and manipulate its parishioners. The RCC allowed scripture only in Latin, the language of Rome. It was the official language of the RCC, and all prayers were required to be said in Latin, as were all sermons (homilies). Parishioners were forbidden to possess it or ever read it. Only the clergy were allowed.

Much avarice and corruption were in the priesthood and the church rulers. This outraged Luther who then set forth to translate the scriptures into German and have it distributed. As people read for the first time the Bible in their own language and heard preaching in their language instead of in Latin, they began to be saved by faith alone on Jesus Christ. This grew rapidly, and they were called "Lutherans." This began the Protestant Reformation.

It also began a whole new era of persecution against these "protesters of the Catholic Church," or "protestants." Many were tortured, burned at the stake, or beheaded.

However, the true word of God was now in the hands of ordinary people. Nothing would stop this rapidly growing movement. Nothing would stop the persecution coming from the Pope and his political cohorts across Europe.

We will now look at some of the heroes of the faith who risked everything to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ and faith on His saving grace.