

REFORMATION 500 WEEK 4: MARTIN LUTHER'S CONVERSION

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was born at Eisleben, Germany, and grew up a pious catholic in a world whose headlines featured such monumental people as Columbus, Cortez, Machiavelli (1469-1527), Michelangelo (1475-1564), and Copernicus (1473-1543).

In 1505 Luther was shocked by the sudden death of his friend, who was killed in a duel, or struck dead by lightning at Luther's side. Shortly afterward, he was overtaken by a violent thunderstorm near Erfurt, and was so frightened that he fell to the earth and cried out, "Help, beloved Saint Anna! I will become a monk." He became a monk, in spite of the bitter grief and anger of his father.

At the monastery at Erfurt, Luther "took the monk's habit in 1506 during a ceremony which culminated in Luther's prostrating himself before the abbot. Ironically this was over the very slab that covered the grave of a principal accuser of reformer John Huss" (Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther*, p.28).

In the monastery, Luther "lived a life of strict asceticism. With all his might he tried to earn salvation by his good works. He cheerfully performed the humblest tasks. He prayed and fasted and chastised himself even beyond the strictest monastic rules. He wasted away until he looked like a skeleton.... He was oppressed with a terrible sense of his utter sinfulness and lost condition, and this cast him into the deepest gloom of black despair. No matter how hard he tried, never, it seemed to him, had he done enough to earn salvation" (Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 162).

On May 2, 1507, Luther was ordained to the priesthood, and said his first mass. "He was so overwhelmed by the solemnity of offering the tremendous sacrifice for the living and the dead that he nearly fainted at the altar" (Schaff, 7:125).

In 1510, Johann Von Staupitz, Luther's spiritual father, sent Luther to Rome, hoping that the Holy City would help him make his peace with God. Luther "ascended on bended knees the twenty-eight steps of the famous Scala Santa (said to have been transported from the Judgment Hall of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem), that he might secure the indulgence attached to this ascetic performance since the days of Pope Leo IV. in 850, but at every step the word of the Scripture sounded as a significant protest in his ear: 'The just shall live by faith' (Rom. 1:17)" (Schaff, 7:129).

After he returned from Rome to Germany, Staupitz sent Luther to study and teach at the university of Wittenberg (in Saxony). "He pondered night and day over the meaning of 'the righteousness of God' (Rom. 1:17), and thought that it is the righteous punishment of sinners," but he finally realized "that it is the righteousness which God freely gives in Christ to those who believe in Him" (Schaff, 7:122). The sinner is justified by faith alone, without works of law (Romans 3:28). Good works are not the *cause* of salvation but the *fruit* of salvation. "Here I felt," he said, "that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."

Luther finally had peace as he realized that salvation was earned on his behalf by Jesus Christ and therefore cannot be earned through good works, penance, or indulgences. "Now,... where did I put my pen."

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REFORMATION 500 WEEK 4: HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, QUESTIONS 9-11

Question 9: Does not God, then, do injustice to man by requiring of him in His law that which he cannot perform? **No, for God so made man that he could perform it; but man, through the instigation of the devil, by willful disobedience deprived himself and all his descendants of this power [to obey perfectly].**

God is not unjust to continue to require fallen man to obey Him perfectly, because God created our first parents with the ability to obey Him perfectly. But they lost this ability for themselves and also for their posterity: “in Adam all die” (1 Cor. 15:22). If a prince were to give a nobleman a piece of property and he were to rebel against him, he would lose the property not only for himself but for his posterity also; and the prince would do no injustice to the nobleman’s children by not restoring to them what was lost by the rebellion of their father. God’s demand for perfect obedience should make us admit and be sorry about our inability and seek His salvation in Christ (Rom. 3:19-26).

Question 10: Will God allow such disobedience and apostasy [*falling away from the truth*] to go unpunished? **Certainly not, but He is terribly displeased with our inborn as well as our actual sins and will punish them in just judgment in time and eternity, as He has declared: ‘Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them’ [Deut. 27:26 in Gal. 3:10].**

Our inborn sin (*original sin*) is our sinful nature which we inherited from Adam through our parents; and is the root cause of our actual sins – sinful thoughts, words, and deeds: “*out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries,*” etc. (Mark 7:21). Every sin is a violation of God’s law; and, therefore, according to God’s justice, deserves eternal punishment and banishment from God (Gen. 2:17; Gal. 3:10). God’s punishment of sin *begins* in this life (Rom. 1:18). It includes all the miseries of this life, together with death itself. The small punishments of this life are warnings to the unrepentant that a greater and more complete punishment is still to come (Luke 13:5). As for the righteous, though they suffer many of the same things the wicked suffer, the afflictions of the righteous are not to be regarded as punishments; but they are merely the chastisement of a loving father (Heb. 12:6).

Question 11: But is not God also merciful? **God is indeed merciful, but He is likewise just; His justice therefore requires that sin which is committed against the Most High majesty of God, be punished with extreme, that is, with everlasting punishment of both body and soul.**

God is exceedingly merciful, but he will not exercise his mercy in a way that does violence to his justice. A crime committed against God, who is infinitely good, demands infinite “everlasting punishment” (Matt. 25:46). And when God does execute his justice, “he does not delight in the destruction of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23; 33:11); and has also shown his mercy and compassion toward us, by laying the punishment which we deserve upon his own Son” (Ursinus). Next week we begin to see how we escape the just punishment of our sin.

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