

66. MARTIN LUTHER (1) HIS YOUTH

"You naughty rascal! I'll teach you to be obedient!" Time and again, the stick flashes down unmercifully. A scared boy ducks down, trying to make himself as small as possible, but it doesn't help. It is impossible to dodge the painful blows of the stick. He turns and twists without success. Red-faced, the teacher returns to the front of the classroom, muttering about that pesky student.

Wincing with pain, Martin rubs the spots where the stick has hit him. His whole body hurts. There are tears in his eyes, but he refuses to cry. That wouldn't be cool! This is the fifteenth time this morning that his teacher has flogged him! The lesson continues.

History does not tell us whether Martin still managed to pay attention that morning. It wouldn't be surprising if he didn't follow that morning's lesson anymore!

Martin must have been quite a mischievous boy to get fifteen floggings in one morning! Try *that* today!

Was he such a nuisance then? No, Martin was a happy, cheerful chap who could sometimes be headstrong. Had that aroused the rage of his teacher?

Mind you, Martin was used to being beaten. His father, Hans Luther, could also punish him unmercifully for the slightest offence. Luther's dad was very strict in the upbringing of his children. He was *too* strict!



Hans and Margaret Luther, Martin's parents. Wikimedia Commons

For a minor offence, even his mother once beat 'her Martin' so severely that he bled.

No, Martin was never treated very gently; he was not a spoilt boy. He didn't enjoy a carefree, happy youth.

He trembled for the consequences of the slightest offence. When he heard the name 'Christ', he turned pale with fear because if his *parents* and *teacher* were so strict, how strict must *Christ* then be? He believed that Christ was a strict Judge who was angry with him because of his sins. When Martin thought about death, he trembled because dying meant 'meeting God'; if that happened, he would go to hell. He was fully convinced of that.



The Luther family house in Eisleben.
<https://www.luther.de>

MARTIN'S BACKGROUND

Martin Luther was born on the 10th of November 1483 in the little town of Eisleben in the middle of Germany. His parents were Hans and Margaret Luther. His father had a farming background; his mother belonged to the middle class.

When Martin was born, they were poor. His father worked in the mines, earned meagre wages, and struggled to provide for his family.

Six months after Martin was born, they shifted to Mansfield, a small city close to Eisleben. This move significantly improved their financial situation. When Martin was seven, he was allowed to go to school.



Fam Luther's house in Mansfield.

These days all children must go to school by law, but not then. Most boys and girls never went to school and could neither read nor write. Martin was privileged to be able to go to school and learn the basic skills of reading and writing. They also had to learn 'The Ten Commandments', 'The Articles of Faith', 'The Lord's Prayer' and some other things. God had given Martin a clear intellect, and his father allowed him to further his studies. First, he went to a school in Maagdenburg for one year. After that, he enrolled at a school in Eisenach.

In those days, the life of young students was not easy. They did not receive board money or government subsidies. They just had to fend for themselves. Martin Luther also had to earn his living, not because his father couldn't afford to support him, but dad Luther thought a tough upbringing would be better for the development of his son. Some hardships would be good training to deal with life's challenges. To earn his keep, Martin and his fellow students would go busking, singing through the streets of Eisenach.

And where did they sleep?

Upstairs, in the school attic, on a straw mattress. No, students weren't spoiled in those days.

Martin loved making music and singing; he had a good voice. Sundays, he faithfully went to church.

Although some close relatives of Martin lived nearby, they didn't offer to take him into their home, so he also had to live in the school attic. You can imagine that those boys didn't get much studying done!

But what happened?

THINGS IMPROVE

During one vacation, Luther did not go home but stayed in Eisenach while his fellow students went home. He wanted to make the most of his time to study hard without being disturbed. Martin worked hard all day. Towards evening he went to find something to eat so he wouldn't have to go to bed with an empty stomach.

Some writers tell us in a very moving way that he finally started crying after he could not find any food. A kind lady called Ursula Cotta pitied him and invited him into her house. This is a lovely story, but I am unsure whether it's true. What is true is that he found shelter in the home of the merchant Mr Conrad Cotta. Mrs Cotta had often seen him listening carefully in church and had appreciated that in him. And so Luther found a perfect boarding house with the Cotta's. No need to sleep in that dark school attic with his noisy fellow students anymore! Now he could study quietly in the home of that merchant. This story clearly shows the Lord's special care for Martin because He had destined him for something great.

He spent three years under the Cotta's loving care. That ended when he had to continue his studies at Erfurt University. He reluctantly left Eisenach and moved to Erfurt. He never forgot his kind-hearted friends at Eisenach.



Luther went singing past the houses to get some money or food.

MARTIN'S UNI DAYS

In the year 1501, Luther enrolled at the University of Erfurt.

His father, who was now an esteemed citizen and had even become a member of the Mansfield council, was proud of his clever son! He decided that Martin should study law and become a lawyer.

Luther was a happy, cheerful student. He applied himself diligently and conscientiously to his studies. Not once did he neglect his lessons. He made excellent progress, to his father's delight, who dreamed of a great future for his son Martin. He thought:

"This is going very well! If Martin continues like this, many opportunities will come his way, and he can become an honoured and distinguished person!"

That flattered his pride.

In the meantime, Martin continued his life as a student. He got along fine with his fellow students. They all liked him and had many fun evenings together.

And yet...

Deep in his heart, strange unrest was eating away at him. True, he could ignore that oppressive feeling for a while when together with his friends, but it always returned. It was irresistible! The fear of God made him tremble. The fear of death, which would inevitably come one day, often spoiled his joy in life. He tried to forget it but couldn't.

As a student, he had access to the library, which was part of the university. Nowadays, students can take books home to read; however, that was not possible then. Books were too expensive for that. Therefore, the library had rows of desks with books chained to them. The students could read and study in the library as much as they wanted but could not take those study books home.

Martin spent many hours there because he liked to study and do research.

One day, while browsing, his attention was drawn to a thick book hidden in a corner, buried under a

layer of dust. Inquisitively, he opened it and started reading the story of Hannah and the youthful Samuel. That simple story touched him.



*Luther discovers the Latin Bible (1501)
Etching by Gustav Koenig 1847*

He had found a complete Latin Bible!

When he finally closed that Bible, he resolved to read it more often. You could find him in *that* corner whenever he had a spare moment! His eyes eagerly devoured one chapter after another, keenly absorbing what he read!

Through his regular study of God's Word, he discovered *many* things which did not agree with Roman Catholic teachings!

He meditated deeply on those matters. They created many questions in his mind that he found difficult to answer. Nobody noticed anything different about him; nevertheless, inwardly, he was waging a severe struggle. He was discovering problems that he could not solve!

In that way, several years flew by; years of fun with his friends; years of strife, doubt, fear, and terror. Years with many long sleepless nights as he tossed and turned.

THE STORM

It is a muggy, warm summer's day in June 1505. The wind has died, and an oppressive stillness hangs in the air. Thick, dark thunder clouds build up in the sky. A thunderstorm threatens to break at any moment. We can already hear the distant thunder rumbling, rolling over the countryside.

A young man hurries along a track in the forest near Erfurt.

It is muggy and hot under the thick foliage of the trees.

He wipes the sweat off his face.

That young man is Martin Luther. He has spent a few days holidaying with his parents in Mansfield. He is on his way back to Erfurt to continue his studies. He marches along steadily. He looks forward to returning soon as it is so oppressively hot.

Suddenly he hears the first thunder rumbling in the distance.

Martin knows that a massive thunderstorm is on its way. Nature shows this clearly. The birds have stopped singing; it is unnaturally quiet. Despite the oppressive heat, the young man hurries on, hoping to find shelter at the next village before the storm breaks.

The storm is moving quickly; the thunderclaps become more frequent and louder; the heavy rain is approaching fast. A gust of wind howls through the tops of the trees. Martin starts to run, but the storm is too quick for him; he gets drenched by a sudden downpour. Lightning flashes flicker across the pitch-black sky in quick succession. At the same time, the thunder rumbles all around him. Another flash of lightning, immediately followed by a rattling crash of thunder, makes Martin run even faster.

He doesn't see another living soul.

No one else is outside in this stormy weather!

He is alone.

A paralysing fear takes hold of him.

Oh, what if he were to *die* now?

Then what?

He dare not meet God, that righteous but strict Judge!

Terrified and gasping for breath, he runs faster, faster, faster!

Suddenly a sharp flash of lightning lights everything up with an eerie blue glow. At the same time, there is a loud crash of thunder right overhead! The lightning strikes the earth right next to him; the sudden air pressure change throws Martin to the ground. The fear of death shows in his eyes.



"Help me Saint Anna, I shall become a monk!"
Painter: Tami Delton. <https://fineartamerica.com>

Martin is terrified!

"Help me, Saint Anna! I shall become a monk!" his trembling lips cry as he wrings his hands in mortal fear.

Another flash of lightning, followed by a crash of thunder, and then the storm moves on. Trembling over his entire body and wet to the skin, Martin gets up and continues. He gets to Erfurt without further incidents.

The rain has refreshed the forest, and the birds start singing their praises again. However, Martin barely notices the change. In his distress, he has made a vow, and that vow is sacred to him. He must keep that vow! But what will his father say? He will not approve! But Martin feels bound by his word.

Involuntarily, his thoughts drift back to the evening when one of his friends accidentally got killed during a playful scuffle. In his mind, he again sees that lifeless body lying there.

The same anxiety arises again - suppose *he* had been the one who lay there; what then? Suppose the lightning had struck *him* just now; what then? Martin knows very well what the outcome would have been.

He shudders.

Perhaps, *perhaps he will find peace and rest for his troubled soul within the monastery's walls.* He'll do his duties conscientiously and punctually. Yes, then he might find peace in his heart.

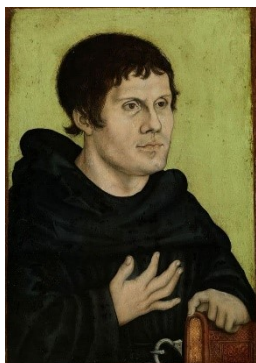
He has made up his mind: he will go to the monastery regardless of what his father may say or think. Nothing or no one will be able to stop him. That ongoing unrest in his heart is the real reason for this decision. The storm just helped him make this decision.

Life in the monastery will remove his anxiety.

He still spends a few days with his friends and tells them his decision. They stare at him in astonishment and think he is joking. But when they realise that their friend is serious, they try to change his mind. They point out that he will sacrifice everything, his youth, future, *everything!*

However, all their efforts fail!

The next morning, on the 15th of July 1505, a few friends travel with him to the monastery. They watch as he lets the knocker fall on the massive gate of the Augustinian Convent. Martin chose that monastery because the monks there are bound to strict rules.



Portrait of Luther as an Augustinian friar.
Wikipedia

Other monasteries are known to be less strict and more laid-back, and easygoing.

Shaking their head and with tears in their eyes, his friends watch him go.

The gate has opened, and Martin Luther enters. One more wave to his friends, and the door slams shut behind him.

Silent, deeply impressed, his fellow students go home. They are sad to lose their friend but do not dare ridicule his decision.

Martin Luther withdrew himself from society. But in God's counsel, different things have been determined for him because...



Luther enters the monastery.
<https://www.outdooractive.com/>

QUESTIONS

1. Summarise Luther's background before he went to school.
2. Describe his education at Eisenach. How did he earn his keep?
3. How did the Lord provide for his needs while at Eisenach?
4. Why did Luther enter the University of Erfurt? How did Luther use his free time there?
5. Why was Martin restless?
6. What did the regular reading of God's Word reveal?
7. Why was Martin overcome with a paralysing fear while alone in the storm?
8. What vow did he make?
9. Give two reasons why Luther entered a monastery.
10. Why did he choose the Augustinian convent?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. What does Martin's choice for the Augustinian Convent reveal about his knowledge of the way of salvation?
2. Why was Martin Luther so anxious to keep his vow?
3. Quote one text from the Bible that speaks about keeping vows.