

Chapter 67: Martin Luther (2) True Peace Sought and Found

LUTHER BECOMES A MONK

A young man wanders through the streets of Erfurt. He lets the knocker fall on the door of a house and begs for a piece of bread or something else to eat. And then, not only in Erfurt but also outside the city, this young man goes from house to house begging for food. The young man is ... the talented and promising Martin Luther!

Begging? What a humiliation for him! Yet, he does not grumble but subjects himself willingly to the monastery's rules. Conscientiously, he applies himself to the assigned duties, whatever they may be. He shows no unwillingness, only submission. Some writers tell us that the other monks often ordered him to do the dirtiest jobs, which he did without arguing, but I am not sure how true this is.

You may remember that Martin was studying to be a lawyer. He completed this in his spare time at the monastery, passing his exams with high distinctions in 1505.

At the monastery, he first had to serve a year as a novice (apprentice), and in 1506, he took the monastic vow. The following year, in 1507, he was ordained as a priest. His father was also present at this ordination. As Luther had feared, his father fiercely opposed his decision to enter the monastery. However, this had not changed Luther's decision to keep his vow.



*Portrait of Luther as Augustinian Monk.
Anonymous.*

Yet now, father Luther comes to his ordination! He still doesn't agree with his son's decision, but two of his other sons had died soon after each other from a terrible disease, and a rumour had reached him that Martin also had died. Thankfully, that proved to be wrong. Martin *had* been seriously ill but recovered. Because of this trauma, Martin's father had mellowed a little and decided

to travel to Erfurt to attend his son's ordination. Grumpy and irritated, he sits there looking straight ahead; at one point, he can't stop himself from muttering to his son: "Honour your father and your mother."

LUTHER STRUGGLES

Once Luther finished his legal studies, he didn't stop studying. He began to study theology on the advice of his Prior (Father Superior of a monastery). The Prior exempted Luther from most activities in the monastery,



The Augustinian Monastery. <https://europeforvisitors.com/germany/erfurt>

including begging for provisions, so that Martin could focus on his studies. Part of his research is in the writings of the well-known church father, Augustine.

On the *surface*, it looked like things were going well for Luther. Yet, he was having a tough time at the monastery because he couldn't find what he was seeking: peace for his soul!

Fear of the curse of God continued to torment him.

Fear for the stern Judge Who would also come to judge *him* one day. He tried to reconcile himself to God by doing good works. That was the doctrine he had been brought up in. He knew no better!

If only those cold and rough stones of his cell could speak...! How Luther wrestled in his cell...! He spent *hours* in prayer. While his fellow monks slept peacefully, Luther knelt beside his bed, wrestling with God. He would groan: "O God, my sins, my sins, my sins."

And when, dog tired, he finally fell into bed in the early hours of the night, he couldn't fall asleep. Many nights he lay awake. But every morning, though drained in body and soul, he still had to complete his duties. At times he fasted for days, refusing to take any food. During the cold of winter, he rejected the comfort of any heating. Numb with cold, he tried to find some relief in sleep. He often whipped his bare back with cutting lashes to beat out his sin.

However, nothing helped. The agonising unrest remained. All the sleepless nights, fasting, praying, whipping, and many other torments Martin imposed on himself weakened his body. He began to look haggard, gaunt, and hollow-eyed. The misery in his soul showed on his face.

If any monk could enter heaven based on good works, Luther would have!

An older monk, Luther's confessor, pointed him to the forgiveness of sins through Christ's blood. The

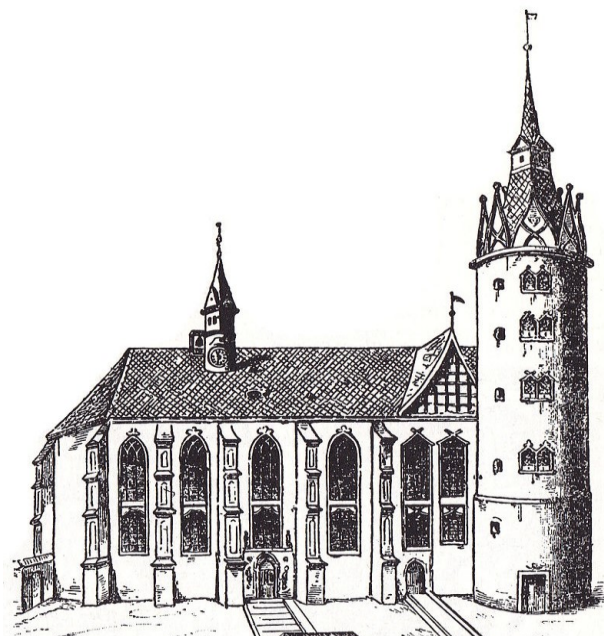
conversations momentarily relieved Luther, but how could those words help if they weren't applied correctly? They couldn't! The anxiety was not taken away but returned and got worse.

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VON STAUPITZ TRIES TO HELP

One day Luther meets a man in the monastery named Von Staupitz. This man had come to inspect the monks' welfare and the monastery's general running.

The Prior tells him a few things about brother Martin. He listens carefully and decides to visit Luther in his cell. Inspector Von Staupitz has a serious talk with Luther and directs him to the forgiveness of sins through Christ's blood. He tries to comfort and encourage him.



The Castle church at Wittenberg where Luther preached.
Wikipedia

When he revisits Luther a few months later, nothing has changed! Again, he finds a desperate young man, looking exhausted and worn out. A few more months go by before Von Staupitz visits Luther for the third time. The situation remains the same.



Inspector Johann von Staupitz. Wikipedia

On that occasion, Von Staupitz apparently tells him: "Brother Martin, God has destined you for something great." But the well-meant words of the inspector did not give Luther any peace. Von Staupitz pointed Luther to the grace of Christ, but that

grace had to be earned by doing good works! In other words: what Luther's good works lacked, Christ would complete.

Thankfully, Luther did not find peace in this advice from Staupitz because this would mean that the Lord Jesus was only *half* a Saviour and *half* a Saviour *is* no Saviour! Then he would have deceived himself *forever!*

Despite Luther's agonising and self-torture, he continued to doubt whether he was indeed elect. He suffered severely. Yet, he continued to search and did not become indifferent as many would have.

Von Staupitz, the monastery inspector, kept urging Luther to continue diligently with his studies.

LUTHER MOVES TO WITTENBERG

In 1508, Luther left the monastery at Erfurt and moved to the little town of Wittenberg. This place is in the province of Saxony. In 1502, the elector of Saxony, *Frederik the Wise* (remember that name), founded a university in Wittenberg.

Luther was appointed as a professor at this university, and he accepted, encouraged by Von Staupitz. Luther then moved into the Augustine monastery at Wittenberg and started lecturing the university students. To prepare for his lectures, Luther had to study the Bible daily. Yet, the message of salvation through Christ *alone* remained hidden; he found no comfort because he thought he had to earn his salvation by doing good works. It was an enormous struggle for him

to come to a right understanding of the gospel message.

Some Sundays, he preached in the church, which was part of the monastery. Sometimes he was asked to preach in the Castle Church as well. He found this preaching difficult. He did it reluctantly, and when he did, his sermons were cold, dry, and very academic. They lacked warmth and passion. Preaching wearied him. Would this ever change?

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LUTHER'S PILGRIMAGE TO ROME

In the winter of 1510 to 1511, Luther travels to the city of Rome. The journey is difficult and dangerous. He must go over the high Alps, where the snow and the bitter cold make progress almost impossible. Many dangers threaten. But even though the hardships on this dangerous journey are great, they cannot remove the joy from his heart. Joy...? Why ...?

Some disagreement has arisen between some Augustine monasteries. Luther and a fellow monk are appointed to travel to Rome to seek advice on this matter. Luther is excited when he hears that he may go to Rome. Joyfully, he quickly prepares for the journey. He does not doubt that he will find rest for his soul in Rome.

Finally, the unrest which has haunted him for so long will be resolved!

Finally, his internal struggles will come to an end. That's why he travels so cheerfully to Rome. The dangerous journey cannot extinguish his joy!

As Luther and his fellow monk near the city and see the distant towers emerge from the haze, Luther throws up his arms and cries out in delight: "*Holy Rome, I salute you.*"

But when he enters Rome, he is bitterly disappointed. He had assumed that in Rome, where the pope, the *Holy Father*, lives, everyone would live a godly life.

Shocked and dismayed, he discovers the opposite is true!

The priests mock the most holy things. They ridicule him because he takes things so seriously. He finds that the clergy maliciously deceive ordinary church members. Instead of holiness, he encounters terrible wickedness and licentiousness. He travels from one sanctuary to the next. He prays, fasts, torments, and tortures himself but finds no peace. He crawls up the Pilate stairs¹ on his bare knees. That was the staircase Jesus had stood on when brought before Pilate. He had been told that this would give him the peace he craved. But the unrest is still there when he finally gets up, drained and exhausted.

What a disappointment!

Finally, it is time to leave Rome again. Luther is glad to go. He detests all the wickedness he witnessed there.

Luther's trip home is very different to what he had imagined! All his high expectations are dashed! The visit has cured him of his faith in 'Holy Rome.'

Later, Luther said that he would not have missed that journey to Rome for a thousand dollars; it opened his eyes even more to the deep decay and



Crawling up the Pilate stairs in Rome. Each year the Holy Stairs attracts around half a million pilgrims who must ascend the steps on their knees, praying along the way. <https://www.wantedinrome.com/>

¹ According to Roman Catholic tradition, the Holy Stairs were the steps leading up to the praetorium of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem on which Jesus Christ stepped on his way to trial during his Passion.

corruption of the Roman Catholic Church. Here we see how the Lord is preparing Luther for his special task.

THE GREAT DISCOVERY

Days turn to weeks, weeks to months, but Luther is no closer to a solution. His inner struggle for true peace continues.

Sure, he faithfully does his daily work. As a professor, he lectures the students of the university at Wittenberg. He regularly preaches in the monastic church and the Castle Church. He spends the rest of his time studying, praying, and fasting, often depriving himself of sleep.

But the unrest remains.

In 1512, he receives his doctorate in theology with a high distinction. Yet, Luther is not happy. The year 1513 sees no change either.

One evening, Luther is with his fellow monks, who are having a good time in the community hall of the monastery. At some point, Luther manages to leave the room unnoticed. He heaves a big sigh and climbs the rough, stone spiral staircase which leads to the small room in the tower where he has spent many hours praying to and wrestling with God. Martin seeks solitude. He kneels and prays to God, Who is still an avenging Judge to him. Heaven remains closed to him. Depressed, he gets up and opens his Bible.

It opens in Romans, chapter one.

In verse 17, he reads:

'The just shall live by faith.'

No doubt, he has read those words before. But at

'The just shall live by faith'

Rom 1:17

that time, he read them without understanding what they truly meant. He reads that text again:

This time, startlingly, the Light begins to shine in his troubled soul!

Now it is God's time!

Now, by the Light of the Holy Spirit, he understands what those words mean!

For the first time, he realises that this passage does not refer to *self*-righteousness, based on good works, but *imputed* righteousness which is fully based on the work of Christ. It is righteousness received by faith. Through *faith*, Christ's righteousness becomes *his* righteousness. One cannot describe the joy and peace he experiences at this discovery. He now understands what it means to be righteous before God in Christ *alone*. That righteousness does not depend on *anything* he does himself but *solely* on Christ's mediatorial work.

Now he tastes the peace he so desperately searched for, for so many years!

This discovery puts the whole Bible in a completely different light! He discovers the love

of God in Christ for lost sinners. The Holy Spirit opens his eyes to the full riches of the gospel.



"If grace depends
on our
cooperation then
it is no longer
grace"

When later in life he talks about that discovery, he writes: 'It felt as if I was reborn and entered through the gates of paradise. All of Scripture showed me a different face' and '...as much as I had hated the term 'the righteousness of God' from then on it became my favourite term.'

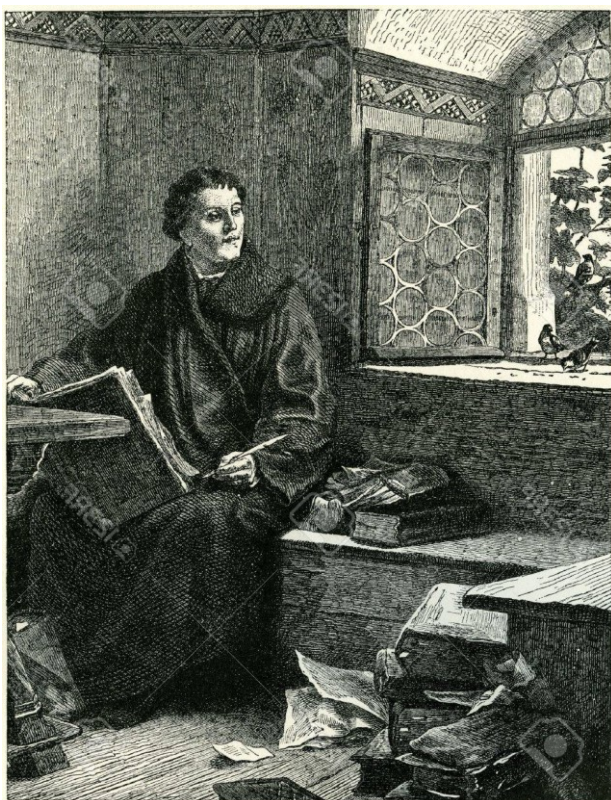
His whole life changed from this moment! Finally, *peace* after so many years of fear and distress! The Reformation really started here. The Reformation is God's work. Luther discovered his *complete* Saviour. Luther learnt to reject the Roman Catholic teaching that Jesus was *half* a Saviour.

An enormous change has occurred, which shows in all he does. It shows in the way he teaches his students. It shows in the way he preaches. His sermons used to be dull and dry but now radiate warmth, love, and passion.

Do you know how that happened? Luther had come to understand what the *grace* of God was! Before, the people were bored during the church services; perhaps many sat sleeping. But the following Sunday, the congregation lift their heads in surprise. Is this the same Martin Luther? What has happened to him? Now his preaching sparkles with love for Christ and his fellow believers! The good seed is being sown and will bear fruit.

Several years go by.

In 1516 Inspector Von Staupitz travels to the Netherlands to buy relics. He appoints Luther as his replacement during his absence. Luther



Luther meditating on Rom 1:17

faithfully does these extra duties. During that time, Luther visits at least forty monasteries and sows the good seed everywhere. This seed will germinate, grow, and bear rich fruit in God's time. How amazing are God's ways! First, He taught Luther by His Word and Spirit. Then, He used him as an instrument to reform His people.



"God does not need
your good works, but
your neighbour does."

Martin Luther

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Why, do you think, did Luther continue for so long in the discouraging attempt to save himself by works of self-righteousness?
2. Does the answer of Von Staupitz have any similarity to any religious views today? Explain your answer.

QUESTIONS

1. What was Luther's main reason for entering the monastery?
2. What was the burden that gave Luther no peace?
3. What methods did Luther use to relieve this burden?
4. Why did he fail for so long to find peace?
5. What advice did his confessor give him?
6. Explain the meaning of the answer of Von Staupitz, summed up by the author as: "That which Luther's works lacked, Christ would supply."
7. Why was this answer wrong?
8. Identify the following:
 - a) Wittenberg - the monastery of Augustine
 - b) Frederick the Wise.
9. Why did Luther go to Rome?
10. What were his expectations regarding the trip to Rome?
11. What did the Lord reveal to him while in Rome?
12. How did God remove the burden from Luther?
13. What is the difference between *self*-righteousness and *imputed* righteousness?
14. Why is this the beginning of the Reformation?
15. How did this experience affect his preaching?