

## 63. SAVONAROLA 1452 – 1498

**S**avonarola was born in 1452 in Ferrara, a place in northern Italy. His parents were wealthy and only lived for their own pleasure. They were real humanists.

But Savonarola did not enjoy all those worldly amusements. Already in his youth, he had an aversion to that lifestyle. At twenty-two, he left his parental home and family and locked himself up in a monastery in Bologna. That city is also in Italy, quite close to Ferrara. This act did not please his parents, but he did what he wanted anyway.

He entered a Dominican monastery. They are a mendicant order, which we discussed in chapter 54. He lived in that monastery for fourteen years. After that, he settled in Florence and became abbot of the Dominican monastery there.

### SAVONAROLA STARTS TO PREACH

In the previous chapter, we learned that Florence was a wicked city and a centre of pagan humanism. There, the dynasty of the House of De Medici set a terrible example. Savonarola loathed the wickedness he witnessed daily. When he could no longer stand by silently, he began to preach against it.

In the monastery, he had read the writings of Augustine, the great church father. These writings were a blessing for him. He began to preach in the monastery church. Soon, this building was too small because his earnest words made a deep impression. As the building could no longer hold the crowds, they permitted Savonarola to preach in the large cathedral of Florence, and soon that church was packed as well! The people travelled to Florence from far and wide to listen to his preaching. The simple monk did not spare anyone. He severely reprimanded the rich and prominent for their sinful life. He declared God's judgements on the clergy, who lived *extremely* sinful lives. He called the people to repentance and conversion and directed them to Christ as the only ground for salvation. We already know that the Roman Catholic church taught that priests could forgive



*Girolamo Savonarola 1452 – 1498. Wikipedia.org.*

sins. Savonarola preached differently. See him standing there in the pulpit while the crowd listens intently.

With his powerful voice reaching the most distant corners, he declares:

"If Christ does *not* forgive sins, then it doesn't help if the priests forgive them. Turn to the crucified One for *Him* to save you. Even though you have sinned a thousand times, He will help you. He forgave the thief on the cross; He will also forgive you if you come to Him with a broken heart."

On another occasion, he cried out:

"Rome, you are mortally ill; you have forsaken God!"

Savonarola did not leave the Roman Catholic Church but wanted to reform it. He remained Roman Catholic till his death.

As a result of that earnest preaching, he received many friends, but others became his most bitter enemies. They looked for his ruin.

## THE HOUSE OF DE MEDICI CONFRONTS SAVONAROLA

The royal house of De Medici ruled over Florence. In Savonarola's days, Lorenzo was the ruling prince. He was wealthy and lived extravagantly, only concerned about enjoying temporal things.

Savonarola did not spare Lorenzo in his sermons either, but rebuked him sharply for his wicked, adulterous lifestyle. He did this publicly! Lorenzo did not like that at all. He ordered Savonarola to come to him. He offered the preacher rich gifts, provided he kept silent. Savonarola shook his head indignantly and firmly refused to accept any money.

He would not be bribed.

Shortly after, his Dominican monastery received a large sum of money as a gift. That money came from Lorenzo, who was trying a different strategy. Lorenzo thought, "Now Savonarola won't dare to admonish me." But he was mistaken. Do you know what the courageous monk did with that

money? He distributed it among the poor in Florence.

Savonarola did not spare the pope either. The pope also tried to silence this preacher, who called for him to repent. He offered Savonarola the cardinal's hat. That was a great honour because the popes were chosen by and from among the cardinals. This offer would give Savonarola the chance to be elected as pope one day!

And?

Did Savonarola accept that influential office?

Just listen to the answer he gave. He cried out: "I want no other hat than that of the martyrs, a red hat painted with blood!" So the pope's attempt also failed. Savonarola did not allow anything to influence and silence him, no matter how attractive the offers were.

One day, Savonarola predicted that Lorenzo would die; soon after, that prediction came true! Lorenzo was only forty-four years old but became seriously ill and died in the prime of his life.



*Giuseppe Bezzuoli's "Entry of Charles VIII into Florence in 1494" early nineteenth century. Wikimedia Commons.*

*Charles VIII and his 20,000-man army entered Florence towards the end of November 1494. He stayed for just 11 days, as long as was necessary to impose humiliating terms on the city—including a fee of 150,000 florins for the French army's upkeep, access to Tuscany's fortresses, and confirmation that Pisa now belonged to France—before leaving to a collective sigh of relief from Florence's population.*



Savonarola predicted that the pope would die; soon after, the pope died!

He said:

"The king of Naples will not live much longer", and soon after, the king of Naples was dead!

All those predictions coming true left a powerful impression on the people. They regarded Savonarola as a prophet. Another time he announced:

"God will punish the inhabitants of Italy because of their terrible sins; a king will come from the north who will march over the Alps and invade Italy."

Sometime later, the king of France invaded Italy. He marched over the Alps with a mighty army and conquered a large part of the province of which Florence was the capital.

Only the city of Florence remained free.

The French troops did not occupy that city.

The people's respect for Savonarola grew. They expelled the House of De Medici, and Savonarola became the leader of Florence. He was not in government because a council of citizens governed the city, but that council listened to him and did what he said.

## THEY LOVE HIM

It is Easter, 1497.

The bells of Florence are ringing.

Crowds of people throng the streets.

They all carry something as they head for the large plaza in front of the cathedral.

One has arms full of fancy articles.

Some others carry a large mirror.

Another has a stack of playing cards.

We see people carrying musical instruments. And there goes a man with an arm full of books. They dump all those articles on an enormous heap in the middle of the cathedral plaza. Then they set it on fire! When the fire catches, the people cheer enthusiastically, and the bells ring while the flames flare up high, burning thousands of dollars worth of items.

That was the work of Savonarola. His influence on the people was so powerful that they willingly parted with all those luxury items.

Life in Florence completely changed. People who had lived as enemies for years became reconciled. They no longer organised wicked feasts and gatherings; whoever still tried was severely punished. The rich supported the poor, who now received all they needed.



*Ludwig von Langenmantel's painting of Savonarola preaching against wasteful extravagances (1879). Wikimedia Commons*

All these things were the fruits of the labour of Savonarola. He seemed to be the king in Florence. Whatever he said or proposed took place. And yet... king of Florence?

Oh no, Savonarola refused that title! He said: "I am not your king, but Jesus Christ is your King!" Above the pulpit, he had a large sign placed that read:

"Jesus Christ, King of Florence."

Will Savonarola succeed in ending the wickedness in Italy, especially Florence?

### THEY HATE HIM

A large crowd stands before the Dominican monastery in Florence.

Wild yells fill the air.

Some people clench their fists.

Threats and curses echo loudly.

The people boisterously push against the gates. Some ringleaders kick the monastery gate to try to break it open. The people cheer loudly when the heavy door finally opens with a groaning creak. A group of men storm inside and disappear into the long, gloomy monastic corridors. Then the crowd becomes quiet. Soon after, the invaders return. They are dragging a monk with them. When the people outside the monastery see him, they mock and jeer him. Someone punches the monk's face, so blood drips from his nose. Another kicks him so that a painful expression appears on his face. The people do not show pity but laugh heartily and hurl abuse at him. They taunt and shout.

He is the butt of their ridicule.

That monk is Savonarola!

What?

*Savonarola??*

How is that possible?

Isn't Savonarola the man who has such enormous influence in Florence? Isn't he the uncrowned king everyone respects and obeys?

That is true, yet the people's fury has turned against him.

Why?

What has happened to make the people turn against him so suddenly? Well, nothing is as fickle as the favour of the people. We

may think of the enormous multitude of Jews singing:

"Hosannah, hosannah, blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord!"

They spread their garments on the road and enthusiastically waved palm branches to honour Jesus, the King of Israel. And only five days later, those very same people become hoarse from screaming:

"Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

Something similar happens in Florence. The enemies of Savonarola have not been sitting on their hands. The more prominent citizens caused dissatisfaction to increase in the city. They thought Florence had become dull when it used to be so jolly and lively. They were no longer allowed to enjoy parties or have fun-filled evenings. Savonarola demanded that they should live upright and modest lives. How stupid! No way! That's not their idea of fun! They thought of former days with nostalgia. They fervently longed to return to the good old days. The business people were also unhappy because their earnings had dropped significantly. Especially the stores selling fashion and luxury items had lost a lot of business because of Savonarola's rules. Their owners suffered poverty. No wonder they longed for the former times.

The Roman clergy also hated Savonarola with bitter hatred because he told them the truth



The mob carrying Savonarola away. <https://assassinscreed.fandom.com/>

without mincing words. They looked for a suitable opportunity to ruin him.

Then there was the son of Lorenzo De Medici. The people had driven him out of Florence, and he now lived in exile in Rome. He longed to return to Florence and was waiting for a favourable opportunity. He couldn't wait to take his father's place and be restored to his former glory.

This prince incited the pope against Savonarola. The pope, a monster of wickedness, had an intense grudge against Savonarola because he had dared to rebuke him publicly. All these things worked together to make the influence of Savonarola on the people decline. Finally, the pope called Savonarola to Rome to appear before his judgment seat. However, the monk did not go but wrote a detailed letter to the pope, admonishing the pope to break with sin. The pope did not worry too much about those earnest warnings and continued to live in wickedness.

When Savonarola realised his attempt to get the pope to repent did not work, he wrote letters to the kings of France, Spain, England, and Hungary. He wanted to call for an ecclesiastical council. He wanted them to depose the pope at that council and appoint another one. The pope in Rome heard that and took immediate action. He excommunicated Savonarola. He also threatened the city of Florence with the interdict if they did not obey him and continued to follow Savonarola. (We explained the interdict in chapters 52 & 58).

That's why the inhabitants of Florence turned away from Savonarola, and his enemies had free reign. They stormed Savonarola's monastery, dragged him outside, beat, mocked, taunted, insulted, and threw him in prison. There the Inquisition tortured him on the rack seven times.

## THE DEATH SENTENCE

Finally, the pope condemned him to death based on three accusations.

First, they accused Savonarola of heresy.

Second, they accused him of stirring up the people.

Third, they declared that he despised the pope.

They executed the death sentence on the 23rd of May, 1498.

They erected three gallows in the shape of a cross on the large cathedral plaza of Florence, then stacked three wood piles around those gallows.

There Savonarola would be put to death. What an incredible difference from a year ago!

*Then* they had burnt thousands of dollars worth of luxuries and evil books at the same plaza!

*Then* it was a glorious day for Savonarola!

*Then* the people applauded him, and the bells rang merrily. How easily things can change!

Now thousands of people have again flocked together to that same plaza. But this time, it is not to honour Savonarola but to witness this martyr's death.

Guarded by heavily armed soldiers, Savonarola approaches the familiar plaza. For the last time, he glances at the cathedral where he had often preached. Two of his monastic brothers, who had always faithfully assisted him, will also die the martyr's death. Once more, he looks searchingly at the large crowd. But this time, there is no cheering. Instead, he sees hatred and scorn in many eyes. Amid breathless silence, the hangman performs his gruesome task of hanging the three men. Savonarola gets the middle spot. Then the stakes are ignited, and the fire soon consumes their dead bodies. The ashes are carefully collected and thrown into a stream.

That was the end of Savonarola, the brave preacher of repentance. Rome had *again* silenced a faithful preacher. After this, the son of Lorenzo De Medici returned to Florence, and the conditions Savonarola had worked so hard to eradicate soon returned to the city.

Even though Savonarola earnestly preached repentance, sparing no one, he was *not* a forerunner of the Reformation! He did not attack the *doctrine* of Rome; neither did he combat the error that the pope was the vicar of Christ on earth. He attempted to eliminate the wicked pope in Rome but advised appointing another pope to replace him. Savonarola *was* Roman Catholic and *remained* Roman Catholic even though he said many Scriptural things. His battle was against the



pope's sinful life, the Roman clergy's adulterous lives and the people's atrocious sins, but he never contested the false *doctrines* of the Church. And that's why we cannot rank him among the Reformation's forerunners.

### QUESTIONS

1. Summarise Savonarola's life before he settled in Florence.
2. Prove that Savonarola was a penitential preacher. What foundation for salvation did he lay?
3. What opposition did he receive?
4. Mention three ways the clergy tried to bribe him to keep silent about the sins of rulers, popes, church, etc.
5. How did he react to these attempts at bribery?
6. What was the reaction of the people to his prophecies?
7. Why didn't he become part of the government?
8. Explain how life in Florence changed after the house of De Medici was expelled.
9. Compare the erratic behaviour of the inhabitants of Florence with a similar occurrence in Jerusalem many years before.
10. Why did the inhabitants of Florence turn against Savonarola? Give three reasons.
11. Explain how Lorenzo De Medici and the pope influenced the people.
12. How did Savonarola try to bring the pope to repentance? What did he do when that failed?
13. Why was Savonarola excommunicated? Why did the pope threaten the city with an interdict?
14. On what three accusations did the pope condemn Savonarola to death?
15. Why wasn't he a forerunner of the Reformation?

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Find a text in the Bible to show that bribery is a sin.
2. What does the sudden change in the mood of the people of Florence reveal about them? How can it happen that a person would eagerly burn all items of luxury one day and join in persecuting the preacher who had so much influence another day?
3. In addition to the example of the Jews who cried: "Hosanna" and later: "Crucify Him", there are other examples in God's Word of similar occurrences. List one example.



*Savonarola burned at the stake in Florence <https://assassinscreed.fandom.com/>*