

How the Bible Came to Us - #15

Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation

1. Conditions were in place for a seismic change in people's attitudes toward the church and its authority. More and more scholars were becoming familiar with the earlier Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. Problems at the top levels of the church such as rival popes—each claiming the other to be antichrist—were lessening the authority of the established church. The Bible itself was becoming available in more and more up-to-date languages. The authority of the Church was being challenged from several sides. In that setting, Martin Luther, a former monk and lawyer, was able to put together a series of challenges to the church that shook its very foundations.
2. Primary in that Reformation was the fact that people were able to study and read the Scriptures for themselves. It became increasingly clear to people like Martin Luther that many of the teachings and practices of the Roman Church were not scriptural. Thus, it was possible for Martin Luther to promote his two basic new tenets: 1) That everything in Christianity should be judged by Scripture, and 2) Every Christian was expected to have a personal relationship with God and one did not need to “go to God” through priests or popes.
3. A new understanding of the prophets of the Old Testament and the Gospels in the New Testament showed clearly that the current practices of the dominant church were not truly Christian or biblical. The entire system of sacraments was in question.
4. It is very useful to review the story of Martin Luther. His childhood was spent in hardship. Privation and severe discipline were necessary because of poverty. Because of his poverty, he was treated with harshness in his early years of schooling. For a time he had to sing from door to door to earn money and food. He would go to bed at night very fearful as he thought about what he believed was a stern, unrelenting, cruel tyrant of a "god."
5. But in school, hard work and a very sharp mind soon took him into the top ranks.
6. One day while examining books in the library at the university, he discovered a Latin Bible. He had no idea that such a book even existed. He had assumed that the common passages of Scripture quoted at mass by the church authorities were the entire Bible. Angels guided his thoughts as he read from God's Word. That is what led him to become a monk. His father intended that he be trained as a lawyer. When Martin entered a monastery, his father was very upset and was not reconciled to his son for two years. While at the monastery, Luther discovered another Bible; that one was chained to the wall. He often went there to read it.
7. He tortured himself so much during that period that he almost killed himself in his effort to satisfy God's requirements as he understood them. But none of that satisfied his “soul hunger.”
8. Fortunately, he came in contact with a mentor by the name of Staupitz who began to instruct him in understanding the Word of God. That finally brought him some “peace of soul.”
9. After being ordained as a priest, he was called to further studies at the University of Wittenberg. His special goal while there was to learn to read the Bible in the original languages. Staupitz repeatedly urged him to use his knowledge and begin preaching. His eloquent and convincing words were much appreciated and his hearers kept coming back for more.
10. God designed that Luther should visit Rome. As was the custom of priests and monks in those days, he traveled on foot staying at various monasteries on the way. He could not believe the wealth, the luxury, the dissipation that he saw in those Italian monasteries. When he finally

reached Rome, he undertook the ceremonies and duties expected of priests who visited Rome.

11. At that point in time, the Catholic Church was in the process of constructing the largest church ever built—St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. A great deal of money was needed for that undertaking.
12. The pope had declared that everyone who climbed "Pilate's staircase" on his knees would be forgiven a certain number of years in purgatory. That staircase was a part of one of the larger churches in Rome and was believed to have been carried miraculously to Rome from Jerusalem many years earlier. About half way up the staircase on his knees, Luther was suddenly struck as if by lightning with the words from Romans 1:17, "The just shall live by faith." He jumped to his feet, raced down the stairs, and left the staircase in great mental confusion.
13. After returning to Wittenberg, he obtained his Doctor of Divinity degree. But Martin Luther could not be satisfied with that much information and knowledge. He felt compelled to speak out.
14. A certain official by the name of Tetzel had been granted the responsibility of raising money in Germany to help build St. Peter's Cathedral. He was allowed to sell "indulgences." Tetzel had been a criminal in his early years and he was not above using very unscrupulous means to raise money.
15. Those indulgences, he claimed, could release one from almost any sin. In fact, one could purchase an indulgence in advance of actually committing the sin! Tetzel claimed that if one had an indulgence in hand, it was not even necessary to repent. Furthermore, an indulgence could be purchased on behalf of those who were already dead.
16. Luther recognized immediately that there was nothing but fraud in that system. When his parishioners approached him to have their sins forgiven with an indulgence in hand, he refused. The parishioners returned to Tetzel and demanded their money back! Tetzel was filled with rage.
17. Luther absolutely believed that nothing but "repentance toward God" and faith in Christ could save the sinner. When the sale of indulgences had reached a peak, he nailed "95 theses" to the door of the church at Wittenberg describing all the evils of indulgences and their inability to accomplish anything for the purchaser. News of this event and Luther's proposals spread like wildfire.
18. Luther himself challenged anyone to come forward and debate him over those theses. Although he did not recognize it at the time, Martin Luther's efforts were placing him in direct conflict with the papal leadership.
19. It was not long before a decree came from Rome stating that it was high treason against the church even to allow such a heretic to live. While a number of Luther's followers suffered death, Luther himself was protected by God.
20. People's minds were being awakened to the truth. But Luther himself was summoned to appear before authorities in Rome to answer charges of heresy. His friends were filled with horror. They demanded that Luther be allowed to be tried in Germany. At last, a special official was dispatched from Rome to arrest Luther and silence him. At the same time that official was to condemn Luther's teachings and his writings throughout Germany.
21. Fortunately for Martin Luther at that time, a young friend by the name of Melancthon

appeared. He “stood with” Luther not only as a personal friend but also in the pulpit and before the crowds.

22. Luther was called to Augsburg to stand trial. When he appeared at trial, the pope's representative repeatedly said he must retract, retract, retract. There was nothing for Luther to do except retract. However, Luther responded with the words of Scripture, and finally, the papal representative grew exasperated and demanded that Luther retract or get out. So Luther and his friends left! The representatives of Rome could not believe what had happened!
23. Luther's friends urged him to escape the city and the “clutches” of Rome as quickly as possible. So, Luther left with only a guide to direct him to a secret exit from the city and away from the danger. When the papal representative learned that Luther had left the city, he was irate.
24. Back at Wittenberg a new group of people were going to the university. Instead of pilgrims going to fill the coffers of the church, there were students who went to sit at the feet of Luther.
25. Meanwhile, Luther's writings were read in many countries in Europe.
26. About that time, Martin Luther himself discovered the writings of Jan Huss (John Huss).
27. Luther continued his writings, distributing them especially among those attending various universities. He condemned all of the abuses of the church. Next, a decree from Rome arrived giving Luther 60 days to recant or be excommunicated. Luther met the challenge by writing more vigorously.
28. He finally concluded in one piece, "Already I feel greater liberty in my heart; for at last I know that the pope is antichrist, and that his throne is that of Satan himself." D'Aubigne, b. 6 ch. 9.
29. Luther felt quite certain that the church authorities would soon take his life. Finally, Luther declared himself completely separate from the Church of Rome.
30. That led to the famous Diet at Worms. A papal representative was dispatched with instructions to deal with Luther immediately. Luther's political friends demanded that he be given a “safe conduct” by the Emperor. The Elector of Saxony, a personal friend of Luther, demanded that he be given a fair trial before "learned, just, and impartial judges." D'Aubigne, b. 6, ch. 11. Since that was a very important gathering, many other questions were brought for discussion by the church and political leaders.
31. When the representatives from Rome learned that Luther was to be given a fair hearing, they were very angry. They demanded that if Luther was not ready to recant, he should stay at Wittenberg. Before Luther arrived at Worms, the Pope's representative was allowed to present his case. All the princes of Germany were there to listen. He condemned Luther in the strongest possible language. No one was allowed to speak up on Luther's behalf. But Duke George of Saxony stood up and began to outline the abuses of the church. He ended his speech by saying that it was the abuses of the church that had led to the crisis!
32. A committee was set up to prepare a list of the papal abuses affecting the people of Germany!
33. In that situation, they collectively demanded that Luther be given a public hearing. An imperial messenger was dispatched to Wittenberg to accompany Luther to Worms. All along the way, crowds appeared to see the then famous Luther. He visited the monastery where he had spent years. When he arrived at Worms, a great crowd went out to meet him.

34. Luther's enemies were very frustrated. By asking Luther to appear before the council, that council was, in fact, setting itself in judgment over the pope's edict!
35. Luther was awed by the presence of so many people of authority and elevated position. He was conducted to a place directly in front of the Emperor where he began his defense. But, Luther moved with caution and asked that he be given time to carefully answer from the Word of God. That impressed the assembly that the accused "heretic" was a sensible, reasonable person. The authorities had demanded that Luther recant his writings. He pointed out that much of his writings were based directly on Scripture. He certainly would not want to recant that! Another portion of his writings were dealing with the abuses of the papacy. He certainly would not want to recant those because that would allow Rome further permission to increase those abuses! The speech had been fairly lengthy and in some detail. After having given the speech in German, he was asked to repeat his speech in Latin. That repetition of his points made them stick even more clearly in the minds of his hearers.
36. He concluded by saying that since his belief and faith in God depended directly on Scripture, he could not retract. And he ended with those now famous words, "Here I stand, I can do no other; may God help me. Amen." D'Aubigne, b. 7 ch. 8.
37. The youthful Emperor finally decided that he must continue in the path of his ancestors and support the church. The learned and the powerful all wanted to see and hear Luther. His small room at Worms was crowded with visitors. Some of them tried to find a way of compromise between Luther and Rome. But the princes of Germany and the Emperor himself—recognizing what a breach of faith it would be to violate Luther's safe conduct—determined to escort him safely back home. Luther had not recanted a single point. At every stop on his way home, great crowds went to hear him. But it was not long after his departure before the Emperor was convinced to issued a decree against Luther, denouncing him as "Satan himself in the form of a man and dressed in a monk's frock." D'Aubigne, b. 7 ch. 11. The Emperor decreed that anyone who defended Luther or read his writings was also condemned.
38. The Elector of Saxony, recognizing the danger Martin Luther was in, arranged for a group of friends to "arrest" him on his way home and conduct him secretly to the castle at Wartburg. There, Luther was hidden in an isolated mountain fortress for more than a year. With his disappearance, Luther's enemies exulted. They thought he would be silenced. But, a host of Luther's writings appeared and circulated throughout Germany. And during that time, he translated the New Testament into up-to-date German. That translation would prove to be the decisive blow against the Roman Church.

© 2007 Kenneth Hart, M. D. ***Permission is hereby granted for any noncommercial use of these materials. Free distribution is encouraged. It is our goal to see them spread as widely and freely as possible. If you would like to use them for your class or even make copies of portions of them, feel free to do so. We always enjoy hearing about how you might be using the materials and we might even want to share good ideas with others, so let us know.***

Info@theox.org

Last modified: January 4, 2008

C:\My Documents\WP\StoryofBible\15-BibletoUs-MartinLuther&Reformation.wpd