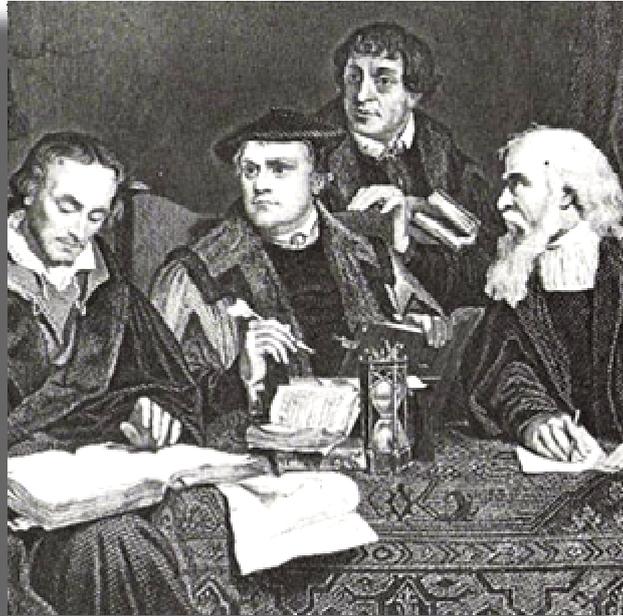


Dawn Breaks over Europe

From 'Men of Destiny' By Dr Peter Masters



Martin Luther

MARTIN LUTHER, BORN in 1483, grew up amidst the peasants and poverty of a small mining town in fifteenth-century Germany. His father was a wood-cutter who later became the manager of a small foundry, smelting iron. He was a hardworking man, but a formidable father who imposed the most rigid discipline on his sons.

In those days school was a place where knowledge was driven into boys by fear of punishment. It was closely bound up with the Catholic Church, and young Martin Luther was well and truly indoctrinated in the fear of God and the power of the Pope. He once said that whenever he heard the name of Christ as a child he turned pale with fright, imagining a terrible judge Who would one day dominate eternity.

Martin was fourteen when he went away to high school at Magdeburg, but as there was not enough money to keep him he joined the ranks of the poor students who begged in the streets for their living. However, he was one of the fortunate ones, because one day wealthy Frau Ursula Cotta took pity on him and welcomed him into her home. Luther was such an exceptional student that he was urged to go on with further studies, so at the age of eighteen he set off for the most famous place of learning in Germany, the University of Erfurt. With his father now better off financially, Luther could afford to take a room and support himself at Erfurt. He studied so hard that by the age of twenty-two, he had achieved the degrees of Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy.

Luther's academic triumphs, however, could not suppress a fear which had come to worry him: 'What about my soul? Where is God? What takes place in eternity?' When one of his closest friends was murdered, the thought came back with even greater force: 'What would happen to me if I were suddenly called away without warning?'

Luther soon assumed the status and privileges of a lecturer at the university, conscious of the admiration and pride of his parents. How excessively they demonstrated that pride when he spent his first holiday with them as 'Doctor Luther'! They had no inkling that their pride and satisfaction was about to be shattered, and their son's career thrown away, all in the panic of a few moments.

It happened while Luther was walking the last stage of his return journey to Erfurt. Quite suddenly, he became enveloped in a tremendous thunderstorm. As the rain poured down, Luther moved slowly on until a blinding bolt of lightening seared through the sky and struck the ground immediately ahead of him. He fell to the ground, certain that his end had come. Terrified, he shouted, 'Help! Beloved Saint Anne, Help! And I will immediately become a monk.' A peal of thunder passed away and Luther, still shaking, rose to his feet. He was stunned, surprised to be alive, and more agitated than ever before about his standing in the sight of his Maker. He felt there was no other course open to him than to keep his vow and to enter a monastery. He was about to submit himself to be bound by the very chains of superstition and man-made religion which years later he was to shatter at the beginning of the Reformation of Europe.

It was a very pale and shaken Luther who returned to Erfurt. He promptly invited all his friends to a final supper-party at his room and broke the news that he was going into a monastery. All pleaded with him to change his mind, but nothing would persuade him, and as soon as the party was cleared away and his friends had dispersed, Luther set out – at the dead of night – to apply for admission to the Augustinian Order monastery in Erfurt.

'I thought God was not concerned about me and if I got to Heaven, it would depend mostly upon me. I knew no better than to think that by my own accomplishments, I must rid myself of sin... so I became a monk and came in for a most bitter experience at the same time. Oh, I thought that if I went into the monastery cloisters to serve God in a cowl, with head shorn, He would reward me and bid me welcomed.'

Luther, was twenty-two when he said goodbye to the world, returned his degree gown to the university, and wrote to inform his horrified parents that he had become a monk.

His first lesson at the monastery was designed to make him humble. He was assigned to cleaning, fetching and carrying, and other simple jobs, and after the day's work was completed, he was sent into the town to beg for food. Luther accepted it all as an essential part of his training, and in return he looked to the tranquillity of the monastery and the companionship of holy men to help him attain peace of mind. He was soon to be bitterly disappointed.

The more he tried to live a holy life, the more he realised how utterly impossible it was. The cloister certainly removed him from the temptation of the world outside, but not from the countless sinful thoughts of his own mind. Was there, he wondered, any cure for his preoccupation with himself, or for constant thoughts of pride, envy, lust and hostility? Was there any way of being cut loose from lying, grumbling, complaining, gossiping, resenting, and all the other unholy things which well up from within oneself?

The more Luther looked to other monks for help and example, the more dejected he grew at their shallow lives and empty chatter. Nevertheless, he took absolutely seriously all the monastic remedies for sinful thoughts – even to the extent of inflicting punishment and torture on himself in an effort to be 'purified'. Several times he rendered himself unconscious through pain, but no matter how rigorously he performed the prescribed self-punishing acts, he could not improve himself or banish his impure thoughts or selfish desires.

The day came when the Erfurt monastery was visited by Johann von Staupitz – Doctor of Divinity, founder of the University of Wittenberg, and Vicar General of all the Augustinian monasteries in Germany. As Staupitz walked round the cloisters there was one young monk he could not help noticing, and that was Luther. He was painfully conspicuous.

His sunken eyes and wasted frame betrayed his lack of sleep and constant fasting, while his dejected expression revealed that he had failed to find any spiritual peace as a monk. Having inquired for Luther's name, Staupitz spoke to him.

'Why are you so sad, brother Martin?' he asked.

'Oh,' replied Luther, 'I don't know what will become of me... it is useless that I make vows to God; sin is still the strongest thing in me.'



*The Wartburg Castle, near Eisenbach,
where Luther translated the Bible*

‘Oh, my friend,’ said Staupitz, ‘over a thousand times I have vowed to God to live righteously and I have never kept my vows. Now I make no more promises for I know I cannot keep them. If God will not show me mercy for the sake of Christ, I shall never stand before him. If you want to be converted, do not be eager to learn about all this self-denial and discipline and all these tortures – love Him who first loved you.’

This was certainly a new thought for Luther. He had approached religion entirely to get some form of personal spiritual comfort and peace – being willing even to punish himself mercilessly to get it – but he had not started with God. He had always thought of God as a remote creator, a hard taskmaster and a harsh judge, but now he had a new starting point in his search for God – he must trust Him as a God of love. However, it was no more than a starting point, because he still thought that he had to earn his salvation by doing all the things which the Church demanded.

Luther had spent two years as a monk in the dark cloisters of the monastery when he was made a priest. Much of the time he created a diversion from his confused feelings by devoting himself to considerable study. In a damp, dark cell lit by a shaft of light from a small window-opening and with a candle flickering over his parchments, Luther grappled with the Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible. Staupitz directed him in the study of the Bible, particularly the New Testament epistles Romans and Galatians. But while he excelled in the technical analysis of the text, he did not yet grasp the simple meaning of their message, that sinful people cannot earn their forgiveness, but must receive it as a free gift from God. To Luther, salvation must be worked for and deserved.

Staupitz, discovering the latent genius in Luther, took special and paternal interest in him, and arranged with the ruler of Saxony for Luther to become Professor of Philosophy at Wittenberg University. There he taught classes, continued his own studies, and lived in a cell in a small Augustinian cloister.



Luther's Bible translation and work desk

At the age of twenty-six Luther was called upon to make a journey which transformed his opinions. He was selected by a group of monasteries to represent their interests in a visit to the Pope at Rome. Luther grasped at the opportunity for he imagined that Rome was the very heart of godliness – the centre of the Holy Church. He felt sure that he would derive new and vital spiritual light and experience from the visit, and he set out on the southward journeys across the Alps with very great – if somewhat naïve – anticipation.

On his way he was stunned by the wealth of some of the monasteries he visited, and by the hypocrisy of so many of the monks. But he was to be more amazed by Rome itself. Luther entered Rome like a wide-eyed schoolboy, drinking in all the superstition and ceremonial, believing all that he was told, and eagerly participating in the services and ritual.

But he soon found that the priests of Rome laughed at his seriousness and sincerity. He was sickened by the indifferent way they raced through their liturgical services. The more he spoke to priests, bishops and other dignitaries in Rome, whether in private or over the dinner table, the more he discovered hypocrisy and frivolity coupled with appalling ignorance of, and irreverence for, the things of God.

Above all, he found that the city which was the centre of the ‘Holy Church’ had the worst crime rate of any place he had set foot in, despite its great number of priests and churches. ‘No one can imagine the sins and scandalous crimes committed in Rome.’ He wrote ‘The city is filled with chaos and murder.’ Luther had never for one moment suspected the things which he saw, but Rome demolished in one stroke all his naivety and superstitious belief. He had given his life to the Roman Catholic Church because the Church claimed the power to forgive sins and save souls. But he found that at the centre and metropolis of the Holy Roman Empire, the proud claims of the Church amounted to nothing. She was powerless to influence even her own prelates and priests in the direction of true godliness.

This realisation of the weakness and inadequacy of the Roman Church had a profound effect upon Luther because the Church was his only hope for salvation. Although he had become a monk, passed the theological examinations and been made a priest, he had no personal assurance that his sins were forgiven, and no awareness that he was in touch with God. None of the penances, services, chanting or fasting had helped one bit. His only hope had been to pin everything in blind trust on the power of the Holy Church. He reasoned that if the Holy Church said these things were the way to God, then it must be right.

The fatal visit to Rome at last shattered his unswerving trust in all the pronouncements and prescriptions of Rome. If the Church could not be revered and respected, then neither could her pronouncements. Luther promptly lost confidence in her pomp and ceremony, and not surprisingly, when he returned to Wittenberg he was more anxious than ever to understand what the Bible had to say about true religion and the way to find God.

Staupitz, who was at a loss to know how to help Luther through his spiritual struggle, pressed him to study for the degree of Doctor of Theology in order that he might devote himself to teaching the Bible. Luther set himself to the task and achieved the degree within two years. Then, aged twenty-eight, he was posted to the young university at Wittenberg to serve as professor of the Bible.

As Luther searched the New Testament for answers to his many questions about the true way to find God, he noticed that the only people who thought themselves able to earn God's favour were the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees, and these were roundly condemned by the Lord Jesus Christ. He saw that, according to the bible - There is none righteous, not one... for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3.10 and 23).

As he studied the Psalms in preparation for his lectures, he was struck by the terrible desolation and agony endured by Christ on the cross of Calvary – all foreshadowed in Psalm 22 – and he realised that the only reason for such suffering was that Christ was bearing the punishment of human sin in order to make an atonement. He felt totally overwhelmed as he contemplated the immeasurable love of Christ, that He should come from Heaven into this world on such a costly errand of mercy to undeserving sinners. But how could any individual become sure that his or her own sins were forgiven? For a time this remained a great problem for Luther, until he proceeded to study and lecture on Paul's epistles to the Romans and Galatians. Here he discovered the meaning of conversion to Christ, and how God in that unmistakable experience enables people to know and to feel that their sins are forgiven, and that He has accepted them.

Luther was thirty years of age when he had this experience himself. He was sitting in his cell studying Paul's letter to the Romans when he came to these words: The just shall live by faith (Romans 1.17)

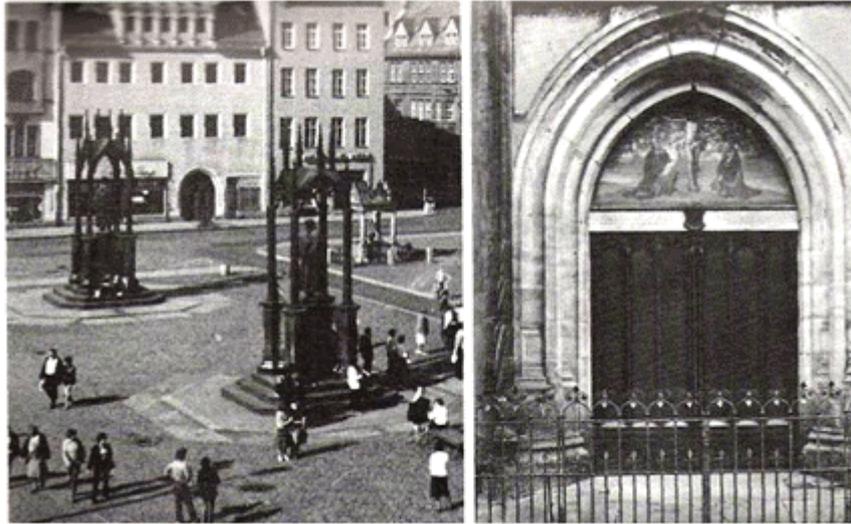
'My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my character would satisfy Him. Night and day I pondered until I saw the link between the justice of God and the statement that the just shall live by faith. Then I grasped that the justice of God is the righteousness by which, through grace and sheer mercy, He justifies us through faith. Immediately I felt myself to have been reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The entire Scripture took on a new meaning... this passage of Paul became to me a gate of Heaven.'

Luther's discovery was that the blessing of forgiveness and a new life from God came as a free and gracious gift to all who believe in Christ's atoning sacrifice as the only way for the washing away of sin, and who place their trust and their lives in Christ alone for their salvation. Immediately Martin Luther felt certain that his sins were all forgiven, and that he was – by grace alone – a child of the living God, with a new heart and life. But how different was the teaching of Paul to that of the Church of Rome, which taught that acceptance with God is achieved on the basis of good works!

Immediately after his experience of conversion, Luther's name and fame spread as he preached and taught the Bible in Churches and in monasteries as well as in his university. He became increasingly appalled at the avarice and hypocrisy of the Roman Catholic clergy, and the deceitful trickery of church leaders, of which Pope Julius II was among the most outrageous. His dissatisfaction was brought to a head in 1517 when monks from Rome began raising money for the building of St Peter's by 'selling' the Pope's pardon for sins – indulgences.

The experienced vendor of indulgences Johann Tetzel, a Dominican priest, went from town to town selling them in the most shameful manner. His sermon seldom varied, and usually concluded with these words:

'Consider this: that all who are contrite and make their contributions will receive complete remission of all their sins. And listen also to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends imploring you and saying: "pity us! Pity us! We suffer in dire torment from which you can redeem us for a mere pittance." Don't you want to help them? Hear your father or mother saying, "We bore you, fed you, left you our money, and now you are so heartless that you are not willing to set us free at such a small price. Will you let us die here in flames?" Think that you have the power to release them, because –
The moment the coin in the coffer rings
The soul from purgatory springs.'



The statues of Luther and Melancthon in the town square, and the 'theses door' of the castle church, Wittenberg

On the eve of a great religious festival when great crowds gathered in the town, Luther nailed to the church door his response – the now famous ‘Ninety-Five Theses’ in which he denounced the sale of indulgences and denied the Pope could forgive sins.

By this time Luther had clearly formulated the three great principles of the Reformation: first, that sinners are justified (declared righteous) before God by faith alone, and not by their works; secondly, that every true believer has direct access to God without the need for the mediation of priests or church; thirdly, that the Bible is the sole authority for true religion, and the church is to submit to its teaching.

The struggle to break the fetters of superstitious, man-made religion had begun. By the time of his death twenty-nine years later, Luther had become the great Reformer whom God used to usher in the Reformation of Europe and to restore the faith of the Bible. By the enabling power of God he withstood all opposition and laboured as a preacher, teacher, writer, thinker, contender for the faith, translator of the Bible, and as a guide and counsellor to burgeoning Reformation churches in Europe. Through his ministry a countless host of people came to see the Lord’s method of salvation – by grace alone, through faith in Christ.

His best-known words are probably those uttered at the end of his defence at the Diet of Worms in 1521, where he was condemned as a heretic and excommunicated from the Church of Rome. When called upon to repudiate his teaching, he declared: ‘Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, I cannot accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God! Amen.’