

*When God Gets Hold of a Person:
A Visit from Martin Luther*

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One cannot know the results of one's actions beforehand. Sometimes they ripple on and on beyond what one might ever imagine. I was not trying to change the world. I was merely trying to follow the will of God and in the course of that I made some *suggestions* as to how the church might be more faithful. Those conversation starters, the theses, set in motion a cavalcade of events, ultimately causing profound changes throughout the Church and throughout the Holy Roman Empire. It has been said that more books have been written about me, Martin Luder, than about any other person except our Lord Jesus. In the off chance that you have not read one of these books, here is my story.

Born the hour before midnight on the 10th of November, 1483, in Eisleben, Saxony. The first of seven children in a peasant's home, a home of farmers for generations. A religious home, after the manner of the times. We knew nothing but the Church of Rome. We were taught to love and obey God, to love and obey parents.

My mother once whipped me for stealing a walnut from her cupboard. "A matter of principle," she said. I had disobeyed, and I must learn obedience. I presume my father loved me, but he never told me. He was to be obeyed.

I knew nothing of a loving God, a loving heavenly father. God was an angry judge, who condemned me for what I was and what I did and what I failed to do.

While I was a child our family moved to Mansfeld, where my father became involved in the oversight of a mine. Thus, our family prayed to St. Anne, the patron saint of mining. We had saints for every occasion and occupation. We appealed to St. Anne, who appealed to the Virgin Mary, who appealed to Jesus, who appealed to the stern Father.

At 14 I was sent to live with relatives to attend university. All subjects were taught in Latin. I hated this time. It was like being in purgatory, if not hell.

During my college years a good friend was suddenly taken by death and it hugely impacted me. I could die at any moment and I was not ready to die. The Spirit started moving in me and I begin to think of eternal things.

After my general subjects I was required to choose a major. There were only three—medicine, law, or theology. My father wanted me to become a lawyer—an up and coming profession. Feudalism was waning. Contracts and deeds were much in demand. I could make enough money to care for him in his old age. My father acquired for me, at no little expense, THE textbook for a law student at that time, the Justinian law book.

I was very much used to following my earthly father's will. I did not yet consider my Heavenly Father's will. So I started upon this course of study, to become a lawyer. But it was not what I wanted to do. After a time, I took a week off of school to consider what I was to do. I felt trapped.

Returning to the university on foot I was caught in a thunderstorm, an epic, apocalyptic thunderstorm. Now understand, I did not have the knowledge of meteorology that you do—colds front, warm fronts, high and low pressure systems. This storm seemed to me a living, malevolent being. I was terrified. Nature at war with the earth. Deep darkness in the middle of the day, interrupted by intense, immense flashes of lightning followed immediately by earth-shaking thunder. I was terrified, afraid of dying in the midst of this storm. I made a bargain in that instant of abject terror. "Help me, St. Anne. I will become a monk!"

I lived! Now, being a monk had no more appeal to me than being a lawyer, but a bargain is a bargain. I left law school, gave a simple dinner in the tavern for my friends, gave away my earthy possessions...My father was enraged that I left the study of law and he believed I would die an early death for this violation of the commandment to honor parents. We were estranged for many years.

So I took the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and entered the Augustinian seminary in Erfurt in July of 1505. I was 21. There I saw for the first time a complete copy of the Holy Bible, the Latin Vulgate version.

This monastery had a good reputation as a serious and sober community. There was no monkey business in that monastery. I proceeded with great energy to do all I could to win the favor of God, by debasing my physical self. I would whip my own back with the cincture, the rope around my waist. I scrubbed stone floors until I grew callouses on my knees, unfortunately not from prayer, but from scrubbing already clean stones. I confessed every sin I had done and even ones I had not done. I sought in every way to *earn* God's favor.

This period of my life was one of deep spiritual despair. I later wrote, "I lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of him the jailer and hangman of my poor soul." I believed that I must be righteous to be accepted by God, but I knew I was not righteous. I was an abject sinner. I was expected to love God, but I didn't. I feared God!

An old supervising monk said, "My son, you must also trust God and believe God." This was a beginning for me.

Soon I was sent to join the faculty of the University of Wittenberg. I was most unhappy with this assignment. Wittenberg was in the sticks, at the very edge of the Holy Roman Empire. The city literally stank with its salt mining and beer brewing. But this new university was founded upon the newly emerging idea of humanism, of going back to the sources of each discipline, studying not medieval commentators, but ancient writers. This was a novelty. I was first assigned to be chair of moral philosophy.

In 1511 I was sent to the city of Rome. My supervisor felt it would inspire me and help me with my doubts. A journey of months, through the Alps. At last, when the great city came into view I was overjoyed. But that joy soon turned to great disappointment. The flippancy of the Italian priests! They would race through the mass. Some even said, “This is bread, and bread it will remain. This is wine and wine it will remain.” I saw Pope Julius carried on a litter borne by four men. Saw indulgences being sold. An indulgence was a certificate that could be purchased to get a relative out of purgatory. I later wrote, “I went to Rome with onions on my breath. I returned from Rome with garlic on my breath.” I was not commenting on the Italian cuisine, but that I was worse off than before.

Shortly after my return to the university I was named the chair of biblical theology and spent the remainder of my career in this position, though I also served as provincial vicar of Saxony and Thuringia, overseeing eleven monasteries.

The chair of *biblical* theology. For the first time, the Bible was going to become the textbook for theology class. I wrote my lectures in full manuscript, word for word. I intended to teach one book of the Bible per semester. At the end of the first semester I only had finished the first three chapters of Genesis, so I needed to do something different. I focused on a few books—Genesis, the epistles, especially Galatians, which spoke to my own struggles.

The Bible became very dear to me and I read through it every six months. Shortly after my return from Rome God granted me a life-changing insight as I was studying scripture. I was reading Psalm 31, as David fled from King Saul, he cried “Preserve me, O Lord, preserve me in thy righteousness, THY righteousness.” I finally understood that it was GOD’S righteousness, not MY righteousness, that saved me. My life was never the same.

In 1515 the Italian pope wanted to replace the ancient Church of St. Peter, so he came up with an ingenious way to finance the project. He gave Germans the privilege of paying for it, through the sale of indulgences. As mentioned, these were certificates presumably authorizing release of partial or full penalty from purgatory, even for serious sins like adultery or theft. The Dominican monk, Johann Tetzel, who sold the indulgences, claimed that “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

I was incensed. This was the final straw for me.

I wrote out a series of discussion questions, termed “theses,” inviting church leaders to converse on these topics. My intention was to begin a debate among academics, not instigate a popular revolution, though I recognized there was the potential for that. I asked, “Might not indulgences lead Christians to avoid true repentance and sorrow for sin, believing that they can forgo it by purchasing an indulgence? Wouldn’t the purchase of indulgences also discourage Christians from giving to the poor and performing other acts of mercy, believing that indulgence certificates were more spiritually valuable?”

Perhaps the most volatile of the theses was this: “If the pope has the power to release souls from purgatory, why does he not, out of his evangelical charity, simply declare purgatory empty, rather than dispense indulgences for filthy lucre?” All told, there were 95 of these theses. Tradition says that I nailed them to the church door on October 31, 1517. Actually, what I did that day was send the theses to Albert of Brandenburg, the Archbishop of Mainz. I wrote mine in Latin. Few people were literate in my day and if they were, they would have read German, not Latin. A few days later, someone else translated them into German and nailed a copy of them to the church door...Sorry.

Others, using the new movable type printers, had them printed in pamphlet form and distributed. They were soon everywhere and Martin Luder became a household name.

Two years later a debate was set up at Leipzig. Leipzig and Wittenberg were rivals, like sports teams today. If Wittenberg was the Vikings, Leipzig was Green Bay. It was a three-week debate, sort of like an artist’s series. An oratorio was composed for the event.

The pope’s champion was named Johannes Eck, an accomplished speaker. Eck would speak eloquently and at length. I would respond in 30 seconds or so with words from St. Paul. After a while it was clear that I was winning the debate. Eck was sputtering. My boldest assertion in the debate was that Matthew 16:18 (when Jesus calls Simon “Peter, the rock,” and says that Jesus will build the church on that rock) does not confer on popes the exclusive right to interpret scripture, and that therefore neither popes nor church councils were infallible.

Eck responded, “Luther, you sound like a Hussite.” I knew Hus had been condemned by an ecclesiastical council and burned at the stake as a heretic a century earlier, but I didn’t know much about him. During a break I looked him up and found that Hus had come to the same conclusions I had. So when we re-convened I said, “You’re right. I am a Hussite.” That sealed my fate.

On 15 June 1520, the Pope sent a document to me, called a papal bull, threatening me with excommunication unless I recanted. I publicly burned the document. As a consequence, I was excommunicated as a heretic by Pope Leo X on 3 January 1521. This meant, by papal law, that I had no possibility of heaven. (Even if someone paid indulgences on my behalf.)

Now what awaited was punishment by the state. No separation of church and state in those days. So in April 1521 at the Diet of Wurms I was again asked to recant.

“I will retract nothing,” I replied. “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. Here I stand.” It was not said in a bombastic tone. I looked over at my friends, who were in abject despair, knowing I had just signed my own death warrant, and I cried, “What can I do? I can do no other. May God help me.”

I was allowed to leave, but an imperial ban was placed on me. Anyone could have killed me and been rewarded by the state for it.

I left Wurms, but I was kidnapped on my way home and hauled off to the castle at Wartburg. Kidnapped, as it turned out, by my friends, who thereby saved my neck. I spent 11 months there in hiding, in disguise. I grew a beard. Wore armor. I was called Knight George. I had time to translate the New Testament into German. I wanted to put the scriptures into the hands of the people.

Now, others had translated the Bible into German, but I tailored my translation to fit my own doctrine. For example, Romans 3:28, “we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” I added the word “alone” after “faith”—justified by faith *alone*—believing that this better rendered the true meaning of what Paul was getting at.

Meanwhile, in my absence from Wittenberg, hotheads started to take over the Reform movement, iconoclasts, who wanted to change everything about the church, through violence if necessary. The town leaders actually asked me to return, which I did, and I preached moderation.

In 1525 in the midst of all this upheaval, some nine nuns left a convent in a neighboring town and came to Wittenberg for protection. We decided that these nine nuns should have husbands so we arranged for them to marry nine men we picked out. This worked out for 8 of them, but one refused to marry the man that we had picked out for her, a Dr. Glotz. We were bewildered and angry. We said, “So who would you like to marry, if not Dr. Glotz?”

She looked at us and pointed at me. “You. I want to marry you.”

I said, “No. That’s impossible. I am under the ban. I will not bring you to a marriage altar and then to a funeral.” I said, “No.” She said, “Yes.” We were married in June.

Katharina von Bora was 26. I was 41. Thus was instituted the idea of married clergy. Certainly the idea of a celibate clergy was not biblical. Marriage and home can be a retreat for pastors. I called her “Katie, my rib.” Sometimes I called her “Pope Katie.” Soon came six children, and only then was my father reconciled to me, through my gift to him of grandchildren.

Kate was God’s greatest gift to me. She was wise when I was not. During one period when things were not going well with the movement and I was short and cranky with everyone around me, I returned home and found my dear wife sobbing in our bedroom. Solicitous, I said, “Dear Katie, whatever is the problem?”

“Oh, Martin, I am weeping because our dear Heavenly Father is dead.”

“What?! Don’t be silly. Our Heavenly Father is not dead.” (I was the theologian in the family. Certainly I would have been notified in the case of his demise.)

“Oh, not dead? That is wonderful news,” Katie exclaimed. “The way you have been acting lately I was sure that Our Heavenly Father had died.”

Over the next years I was busy establishing a new church and a new form of worship service. I wrote two catechisms and several dozen hymns, for “next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world.”

I admit that in some of my later works I expressed great animosity toward the Jews. I wrote that Jewish homes and synagogues should be destroyed. Remember, friends, I was a man of my day. Your Jean Calvin, however, took a much friendlier view toward the Jews.

And I heartily endorse your Presbyterian motto, “the church reformed, always reforming.” Yes! The Holy Spirit continues to shed light and reveal God’s will in new ways.

For years I suffered from ill health. Finally, on February 18, 1546, I who had been led out of ignorance into understanding, out of sin into salvation, out of darkness into light, out of turmoil into peace, was led out of this life to a better. I was 62. I was buried in the Castle Church in Wittenberg, beneath the pulpit.

I was, in many ways, an ordinary man. But this ordinary man was used mightily by our extraordinary God, because I was intent on one thing, and one thing only, to seek the will of God and do it to the best of my ability. Not a bad legacy.

For what will you be remembered?