

Martin Luther

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 October 2022

Preacher: Jeremy Sarber

[0 : 0 0] So I began this series in Hebrews 12. The author of Hebrews says, we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. And in context, he's referring to those heroes of faith mentioned in the previous chapter.

When we consider their faith, we are encouraged to run with endurance the race that is set before us. As the author says regarding Abel in particular, through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

So we are motivated to endure the race that we run as we examine others who endured the race. They still speak to us in that way. Even so, history is never black or white.

I wish it were, but it's not. More to the point, no one we discuss in this series is perfect. No one in Hebrews 11 was perfect.

And while that may seem like a very obvious point to make, we have a tendency to forget it. We want the good guys of history to be good guys, always. We want the bad guys to always be bad guys.

[1 : 0 9] For example, more than one person asked me how Augustine could have such a firm grasp on the depravity of man and the sovereignty of God, but have some pretty glaring blind spots in other areas.

The short answer is, Augustine wasn't perfect. Today we will examine the life of Martin Luther. And spoiler alert, Martin Luther wasn't perfect.

He did not have a single light bulb moment when all truth was revealed to him in an instance. I believe the church owes a lot to Luther, but he had flaws in both doctrine and character.

But as they say, we shouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater, whether we're talking about Luther or anyone else in history. We can commend his virtues despite his flaws. And let me also say that we should not excuse his mistakes because he had virtues.

History, again, is never black or white. Tomorrow is Reformation Day, the anniversary of Luther posting his 95 theses at the church in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517.

[2 : 2 6] Wittenberg, by the way, is spelled with a W, not with a V, for those of you taking notes. Now, when we think back to that pivotal moment in church history, we tend to think of Martin Luther as a radical revolutionary, ready to go toe-to-toe with the Roman Catholic Church.

We tend to think of him nailing his 95 theses to the church door as a bold act of defiance. But that really wasn't the case.

Luther was actually quite conservative. He didn't think of himself as a reformer. All he wanted to do was incite a healthy academic debate and, God willing, steer the church back into consistency with its own principles.

That's all. Before we go any further, let's back up and understand what led Luther to nail his theses to the door. Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483.

His family was neither wealthy nor poor. His father was a moderately successful minor-slash-businessman. And like many fathers, he wanted nothing more than to give his son the best opportunities possible to become more successful than him.

[3 : 48] So he put Luther on track to become a lawyer. The problem was, Luther didn't want to become a lawyer. He wanted to join a monastery.

And while we might find that awfully strange, he did have some understandable motives. You see, as a young man, Luther was a fairly serious guy. Even then, he was concerned about spiritual matters, namely the salvation of his soul.

Under the predominant belief system of the medieval church, salvation was very difficult to accomplish. Luther believed the monastery gave him the best chance of getting into heaven.

You know, it would be isolated from a lot of temptations. He would be given the opportunity to wholly focus on spiritual matters. Now, that wouldn't guarantee him a place in heaven, but it would make the path there a bit smoother, if you will.

Plus, a proverb at the time said, doubt makes the monk. And Luther had some pretty serious doubts about his relationship to God. Luther hesitated to tell his father what he wanted to do with his life.

[5 : 01] But between God's providence and Luther's quick wit, he was helped out in that matter. Luther got caught in a severe lightning storm, and he genuinely fears that God is going to strike him down with a lightning bolt at any moment.

So, he prays to St. Anne, the mother of Mary. It's what we call a foxhole prayer, right? It's the kind of prayer where one bargains with God. Lord, if you save me now, I promise to fill in the blank.

So, Luther prays, St. Anne, if you save me from this storm, I promise to quit law school and become a monk. It was a clever move on Luther's part for at least three reasons.

First of all, he promised to do only what he wanted to do all along. Second, vows in the medieval church were taken very seriously. So, his father would never want him to break that vow, or any vow.

And third, he prayed to St. Anne, who was his father's patron saint. So, by the time he told his father about his decision to join the monastery, there wasn't much his father could say.

[6 : 17] There were plenty of monasteries to choose from in those days, but as I said, Luther, he was a serious guy, and he chose a serious monastery. Some were a little bit more padded, you know, better food, better accommodations, but he chose a monastery of the Augustinian order, which meant the living accommodations were actually quite humble, and the rules were fairly strict.

To give you a sense of just how serious Luther was at this time, particularly about his spiritual life, he was required to confess his sins on a regular basis.

The Catholic Church called it a sacrament of penance, but Luther would go to confess his sins so often, and confess so many sins, every single time that his confessor began sending him away.

He would tell Luther to go and not come back until he had committed some sins worth confessing. Now, to be clear, I don't think Luther was confessing every little thing out of a sense of pious religiosity.

I think he was sincerely burdened by his sin, and he wholeheartedly believed in the sacrament of penance, in this confession. Well, Luther, he had joined the monastery in 1505 at the age of 22, and he promptly took advantage of the monastery's greatest features, the time and the resources to study.

[7 : 54] He already had a university education, but the university didn't have much to offer by way of church history and spiritual matters. He wanted to be in the monastery primarily to study theology.

And then somewhat secondarily, he wanted to study the Bible. Now, let me try to explain the distinction, because we're thinking, how do you study theology without studying the Bible?

In the late medieval tradition, sola scriptura was not a doctrine of the church. The Bible was not the church's sole authority.

Instead, the Bible was one authority. Tradition was another authority. Reason was a third authority. And lastly, the Pope.

It was an authority. So these four were believed to be equally authoritative. No one saw any tension between them. Of course, most people didn't read the Bible, so it was much easier to overlook any tensions between them.

[9 : 04] Again, Luther's primary interest was theology. He wanted to learn more about God, which didn't necessarily mean he needed to rush to Scripture because of the current system of equal authorities.

Even so, he did want to study the Bible. And during this time period, biblical studies were just beginning to make a comeback.

The printing press played a role, but there was also renewed interest in reading the classics, with books becoming more easily accessible. scholars and students, they wanted to return to the sources of Western civilization, material that had fallen by the wayside long ago, including the Bible to some degree.

This shift in culture also brought about a renewed interest in the biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek. And though Luther got a relatively late start, learning new languages is typically easier when you're younger or when you're a child.

He went to work learning Greek and Hebrew as well. And while this would prove useful to Luther, I mention it primarily because it was a significant step toward getting the Bible into the hands of lay people, which was not commonplace at this point.

[10 : 30] Perhaps Luther's best-known opponent later on in life was a man by the name of Erasmus. Seeing the flaws in the Latin Vulgate, the Latin Bible, he worked on a new translation and his mantra was famously to the source.

So rather than merely revising the Latin Bible again, he went back to the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament to produce what would essentially become the New Testament of the King James Bible.

Luther also eventually translates the Bible as well. So this renewed interest in the biblical languages is important for getting the Bible back into the hands of the lay people.

Now Luther may have gotten a late start learning Greek and Hebrew, but that really seems to fit his personality. There was a brashness to Luther.

He liked to work fast. For example, in 1520, he wrote a treatise titled The Babylonian Captivity of the Church in which he critiqued the sacraments of the church.

[11 : 40] Don't quote me on this, but I believe the Catholic Church observed seven different sacraments at the time. And at the beginning of his treatise, Luther argued for only three, penance, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

By the end of the treatise, he had reduced that number down to two, and he never bothered to go back and revise the beginning. It seems his thoughts were still developing as he wrote, and he just moved so fast that he didn't have time to go back and revise.

Well, in 1512, seven years, I guess, after joining the monastery, Luther becomes a Bible professor at a small, lesser-known university in Wittenberg.

His sole job would be to teach the Bible. Now, interestingly, professors of the Bible in those days did not follow any kind of curriculum.

They were never told what to teach. He would simply study whatever he wanted to study, and he would teach it as he progressed, and the obligation of the students was to follow along and really learn how to study the text for themselves, to examine his methodology and his approach and learn how to study the Bible for themselves.

[13 : 01] Now, I should also mention that this position was unique. Every role connected to the church required an oath, and typically, that oath was made to both God and the bishops, the pope, the authorities of the church.

The oath of the Bible professor, however, was the only oath that was made to God alone. One had to promise to God that he would faithfully teach the Bible.

That was it. Now, later in life, when Luther opposed church authority, this would allow him to say, I never broke my oath. I've done only what I was supposed to do.

According to his oath, he had an obligation to teach the Bible faithfully, but he had no obligation to agree with church authority or with church tradition.

Well, Luther begins his study and his teaching with the book of Psalms. Keep in mind, no other Old Testament book of the Bible is quoted more in the New Testament than the book of Psalms.

[14 : 19] After Psalms, he moved on to Romans. After Romans, he taught all the way through Galatians. And after Galatians, he taught through the book of Hebrews.

Now, I don't know that Luther could have chosen four books of the Bible more likely to bring about a Protestant Reformation within himself than Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews.

Now, to be clear, Luther was a bit more than a mere teacher. He had a heart for people. During this time, he also preached regularly at a local church in Wittenberg, and he became very troubled when an indulgence preacher came to town.

And he was primarily bothered because he feared that this indulgence preaching would hurt the flock. Now, in case you're not familiar with the Roman Catholic concept of indulgences, this is a crucial part of the Reformation.

So let me explain. First of all, the church believed in the sacrament of penance. In other words, it wasn't really enough to feel guilt because of your sin.

[15 : 38] you've offended God, and you should experience a measure of suffering as punishment in some form or another. And second, the church believed in purgatory, a place between heaven and hell where you'd remain after death until all of your sin debts were paid.

Indulgences, then, were a way for people to essentially punish themselves for sin, that's the penance part, and cancel some or possibly all of their sin debts by paying money to the church.

If you've ever seen a video of the Pope at St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, that was built from the sales of indulgences. Luther is concerned, but not for the reasons you may think.

He still believes in indulgences. He later argues that anyone who denies the sales of indulgences should be anathema, let them be cursed, cut off from God.

He believes indulgences really should be primarily applied to the dead, not the living. So, when he has finally moved to write his 95 theses, he's not making a Protestant argument against the practice.

[17 : 06] He's merely asking for some academic debate. It wasn't an act of protest. He wrote his theses in Latin, which meant the common people weren't going to read it anyway.

It was only meant for scholars and academics. In fact, it wasn't even his first published theses. This was altogether ordinary in those days. As I said before, Luther was quite conservative.

His 95 theses wasn't a bold act of defiance against the church. He wasn't even attacking indulgences. His primary target was the abuse of indulgences.

He didn't take issue with church authority at that time. He merely criticized the abuse of church authority. God Now, in hindsight, we know this was a pivotal moment for Luther and for the Reformation to come, but Luther himself was not yet reformed.

He had no doctrine of justification to speak of. He's beginning to see the tension between tradition and the Bible, but he has no objections to the papacy yet.

[18 : 18] In short, we may celebrate Reformation Day a little early. Luther's Protestant breakthrough did not come until really the following year.

At this point in Luther's life, he's not only conservative, but he's also relatively obscure. He doesn't come from a well-known family.

Obviously, his students and his parishioners know him, but he's not famous by any means. That begins to change, however, when someone takes his 95 theses, translates it to German, and distributes it widely.

The concerns Luther articulated really spoke to the German people. They were feeling some of these concerns themselves.

They had grown suspicious of church authority and felt that maybe they were being taken advantage of, which catapults Luther into prominence, at least in Germany.

[19 : 29] Invitations for him to preach start pouring in from all over the place. Meanwhile, Luther is undergoing a transformation. First, just seeing how his 95 theses are resonating with people, he's beginning to wonder whether or not maybe they're right about church authority.

His confidence in the church is beginning to waver, and second, he's growing in his understanding of salvation. And I'll briefly talk about both. Let's consider the matter of authority.

I said before, the medieval church recognized four equal authorities, the Bible, tradition, reason, and the Pope. Well, Luther disregarded reason pretty quickly.

By the time he posted his 95 theses, in fact, he was already arguing against what he referred to as scholastic theology. It may seem strange to us, but the church would lift up men like Aristotle as authority figures in Christianity.

As Luther writes, the whole Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light. In other words, Aristotle doesn't have anything to teach us about theology.

[20 : 50] To be clear, Luther wasn't opposed to examining and learning from the works of men. For instance, he believed reading Augustine was the perfect antidote to someone like Aristotle.

He believed we should rely on sound theologians, not mostly secular philosophers. Luther would not call into question the other so-called authorities until after his Protestant conversion in 1518.

But I'll go ahead and mention them. In 1519, he enters into a debate with one of the church's great theologians at the time, Johannes Eck, John Eck.

In this debate, Eck continually presses the point that Luther could not possibly be right when he disagrees with church authority, that is, the bishops and the pope, or when he disagrees with church tradition.

And it was a relatively effective argument. He was basically saying, Luther, how can you have the audacity to say you're right when you're the only one saying it? Everyone else, past and present, disagrees with you.

[22 : 04] And you have to admit, that would be effective simply because it would make you pause, wouldn't it? If you're standing alone, am I right about this?

So Eck had an advantage over Luther. He knew church history better than Luther. So what did Luther do? Luther relied on what he knew best, which was the Bible.

He studied and taught the Bible for years. he had memorized large portions of it. Some historians say he had the entire New Testament memorized.

Eck responded by comparing him with Jan Hus, whom the church had previously condemned and executed as a heretic. He basically said, Luther, Hus, they're the same.

In other words, he was accusing Luther of being a heretic. That's a serious charge. That's quite possibly the death penalty. It certainly reads as though in that very moment, Luther instantaneously realized Scripture is our only authority.

[23 : 22] Tradition is not a genuine authority of the church. Bishops are not genuine authorities over the church, not when they contradict the word of God. From that moment forward, Luther believed in sola scriptura, scripture alone.

Now let's talk about Luther's changing view of salvation over the course of the year 1518 and 1519 really. Following his 95 theses, what's really interesting is that the crux of the matter became Luther's understanding of justification.

How is a sinner justified before God? And I say that's interesting because technically Luther could not advocate a position regarding justification that would contradict the Catholic church because the Catholic church did not yet have an official position on justification.

Though it certainly had related and codified ideas about salvation. in the medieval church the gospel you have to understand was less a new covenant and more a new law.

Moses was the old law giver. Christ was the new law giver. If you look at some of the artwork from that time period you will often see depictions of Jesus holding the book of the law in his hands.

[24 : 51] So for them the new covenant did not come with grace it came actually let me read from one of the catholic cardinals that responded to John Calvin later on listen to this he writes and since the way of Christ is arduous and the method of leading a life comfortable to his laws and precepts very difficult because we are enjoined to withdraw our minds from the contamination of earthly pleasures and to fix them upon this one object to despise the present good have in our hands and aspire to the future which we see not still of such value to each of us is the salvation of himself and of his soul that we must bring our minds to decline nothing however harsh and endure everything however laborious that setting before ourselves the one hope of our salvation we may at length through many toils and anxieties attain to that stable and ever during salvation

I feel overwhelmed and discouraged just reading that that was the gospel to them in Luther's day this was the prevailing view of salvation Christ did not come to free us from the law he came to add to our troubles with more obligations more burdens he made it even harder for us to obtain salvation which unbeknownst to them we couldn't obtain through our own righteousness in the first place keep in mind Luther had studied Psalms and Romans and Galatians and Hebrews he was increasingly convinced the Bible is our authority over any church tradition or church leader so by the providence of God Luther was primed and he was ready to see and accept the four solace by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of

God alone Luther later writes though I lived as a monk without reproach I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction I did not love yes I hated the righteousness God the righteous God excuse me who punishes sinners and secretly if not blasphemously certainly murmuring greatly I was angry with God and said as if indeed it is not enough that miserable sinners eternally lost through original sin are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath thus I raged with fierce and a troubled conscience you see how Luther like all of his contemporaries did not see the gospel as good news they saw the gospel as a new law according to him it added pain to pain well

Romans 1 says for I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes to the Jew first and also to the Greek for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith as it is written the righteous shall live by faith when Luther read that passage in similar passages he believed the phrase righteousness of God refers to the righteousness God demands of us to be saved then requires we become righteous enough by our own efforts anyone who understands the holiness of God and the demands of the law knows that becoming righteous enough on our own is impossible read the sermon on the mount that's the very point Jesus makes we will never be righteous enough but Luther has spent his life believing he must try remember he's been a very serious guy regarding spiritual matters since he was young and like

Augustine before him as you might expect he finally reaches a breaking point Luther will later claim to have gotten the revelation he needed while sitting on the toilet which doesn't mean what we think it means that was a euphemistic way of saying he was spiritually distressed his soul was anguished he had done everything he could to lead a righteous life he gave up law school to become a monk he confessed every sin until his confessor told him to stop confessing he was confessing too many minor sins and through it all he felt still like an unworthy sinner who had not done enough he correctly recognized that he still wasn't righteous enough to please God and just when

[30 : 33] Luther can't take it anymore he has actually become angry with God he realizes the righteousness of God doesn't refer to the righteousness God demands of us instead it speaks of the righteousness God gives through Christ Luther says here I felt I was altogether born again and had entered into paradise through open gates having memorized the New Testament he could then recall passage after passage that taught this liberating truth of God's grace for the first time he begins to see justification by faith in scripture and it's everywhere following Luther's conversion and more notably his debate with John Eck the church takes notice of him some in the church actually call for him to be taken to

Rome for trial and typically when someone goes to Rome for trial he does not come back well Frederick the third or Frederick the wise as he was known probably a better name for him was Frederick the clever he was the elector of the region and he comes to Luther's defense I guess perhaps in a spirit of German nationalism he won't permit Luther to go and he has at the time the necessary clout to prevent it but Luther knows he's a marked man he knows the eyes of the church are on him but again he's a serious and somewhat brash guy so he continues writing in 1520 he writes against the papacy and church authority that's a bold move he writes against most of the sacraments recognized and practiced by the church he then writes the freedom of the

Christian which is the closest I think Luther ever came to writing a treatise on the doctrine of justification I'll summarize the freedom of a Christian with two quotes first Luther says a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all subject to none and by that he means the Christian lives free before God there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and to be clear he's not denying the law he's not an antinomian but those in Christ are freed from the law he recognized this and no one could impose a new system of legalism on the Christian second Luther says a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all subject to all which seems to contradict what he said in the first statement but for instance if the Bible says love your neighbor that means you have an obligation to love your neighbor in other words

Christ frees us from the law but as Paul says in Romans 6 are we to continue in sin that grace may abound no by no means unlike his contemporaries Luther understands the distinction between law and gospel he no longer confuses the two they both have their place well in June 1520 the Pope issues a decree that paraphrases Psalm 80 rise up oh Lord a wild boar is ravaging your vineyard to be clear Luther is the boar Pope the Pope gives him 60 days to recant Luther refuses and the church officially excommunicates him the following year he's anathema keep in mind these are the days of the holy Roman empire the civil authorities have a responsibility in many cases to enforce church decisions so

Charles V a rather pious young man is emperor and he decides that Luther should stand trial at the next diet or parliament to be held in Germany this was the diet of Worms Worms is also spelled with a W though it's pronounced Borms so it looks like diet of worms now Luther knows enough about church history to realize that danger is on the horizon while elector Frederick secures his safe passage to and from Worms you know the same was promised to Jan Hus years before he was executed even so Luther goes to the diet he arrives at Worms on April 16th 1521 and he is greeted by the sounds of trumpets and 2,000 supporters lining the streets he received a better reception by all accounts than the emperor which only made the authorities all the more annoyed now

[35 : 54] Luther assumed he would have an opportunity to explain and defend his views but the authorities very intentionally prevented that from happening instead they laid out all of his written works on a table and simply insisted that he retract all of them and it was then Luther gave the least inspiring speech of his career he said can I have a little time to think about it give me a day if you will now before we criticize Luther we should put ourselves in his shoes for a moment he's painfully aware that the death penalty is a very real possibility if he doesn't recant that is and he's also standing in the presence of some of the most powerful people in the world and I think this would be enough to give anyone reason to pause for just a second ultimately though Luther hears the words of Christ ringing in his head for whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation of him will the son of man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his father with the holy angels

Charles gives Luther one day to think about it and he returns the next day to deliver what is probably his most famous speech he boldly declares unless I am convinced by the testimony of the holy scriptures or by evident reason for I believe neither pope nor councils alone as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves I consider myself convicted by the testimony of the holy scriptures which is my basis my conscience is captive to the word of God thus I cannot and will not recant because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound this little phrase is disputed whether or not it was actually said but I'll say it anyway here I stand I can do no other God help me amen both church and state authorities wanted to kill

Luther on the spot thankfully though Charles was a man of his word and he allowed Luther to leave safely his troubles were far from over though Luther's firm stance at the diet of Worms cemented not only his place in church history but also the inevitability of the Protestant Reformation there's quite a bit more we could say about Luther but of course we have to stop somewhere he certainly had his flaws but it is hardly a stretch to say he changed the world he was God's instrument for rescuing countless people from the bondage of legalism he put the Bible back into the hands of lay people he brought the power of music and theologically rich hymns sung by the entire congregation back into the church and there's plenty more in

Roland Baten's biography of Luther he concludes by describing the way Luther came to discover the mercy of God and I think this is a very sweet passage and a fitting way to end he writes but how shall we know God's mercy in Christ only in Christ in the Lord of life born in the squalor of a cow stall and dying as a malefactor under the desertion and derision of men crying unto God and receiving for answer only the trembling of the earth and the blinding of the sun even by God forsaken and in that hour taking to himself and annihilating our iniquity trampling down the hosts of hell and disclosing within the wrath of all the terrible the love that will not let us go no longer did Luther tremble at the rustling of a wind blown leaf and instead of calling upon

Saint Anne he declared himself able to laugh at thunder and jagged bolts from out of the storm this this was what enabled him to utter such words as these here I stand I cannot do otherwise God help me amen languages beised with with learned of these it can ah oh they can seem to■ can say one