

GREAT RESOLUTIONS

Program Twenty Three

A Monk Turns from Works to Grace Part Two on the Life of Martin Luther

Monk of Monks

After Luther's vow in the middle of a terrible storm, he took decisive steps to fulfill his vow and become a monk. He had a new hope that the monastic life would save him and cause him to live a holy life. He quickly invited his close friends to a farewell party where he let them know of his intention. His friends were amazed and some attempted to change his mind. But this was of no avail. He entered the Augustinian cloister the next morning at Erfurt, his new home where, he thought, he would be enabled to leave the sinful world behind him. Luther took the three vows of poverty, chastity, and of obedience. He began to live a highly regulated life under strict rules. In the cloister he would spend hours of prayer, meditation and fasting. He even would enter into other forms of self-denial to mortify the flesh. One of the main duties of the monks at that time, in the age before the printing press, was to make copies of ancient biblical manuscripts and translations.



As time went on however, Luther began to be exposed to much that was contrary to his ideal concept of the monastery. Some of the orders were becoming not places of poverty, but of wealth. Instead of living a lowly and obedient life, many monks had become powerful and vainglorious. Degradation entered the walls of the monastery. Some of the monks and nuns who he had thought were holy and special as the "saints of God," had given themselves over to vices and immorality. But Luther remained undeterred, for he still considered that this was the way to heaven. "I made the vow," he stated afterwards, "for the salvation of my soul. I entered the spiritual state for no other reason than to serve God and please Him in eternity."

Luther's father was very disappointed.

Luther said that his father nearly became mad concerning Luther's forsaking of his good education. John Luther lost two of his sons to the plague, and he now considered Martin as "*the monk of Erfurt who is dead also.*" But Luther pressed on and did not allow his father to dissuade him.

Luther later spoke on his life in the monastery saying, "*I was indeed a pious monk and followed the rules of my order more strictly than I can express. If ever a monk could have gone to heaven by his observance of monastic vows, I should have been that one. Of this all the friars who have known me can testify. If it had continued much longer, I should have carried my mortification, watchings, prayers, reading, and other labors even to death.*"

A New Interest – the Bible

It was not until the age of twenty that Luther, while browsing the books in the library, first came across the Bible. He declared, "*O that God would give me such a book for myself.*" Luther was given to study, and especially now, the Latin Bible captured his attention. He often would come to the place in the library where the Bible was chained to the wall in order to pour over its pages. He also began to study the languages of the Bible, both Hebrew and Greek. These became very useful to him later when he translated the Bible into German.

Hearing of Faith

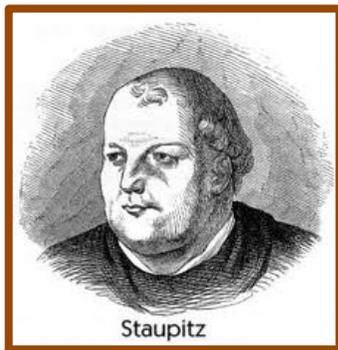
After Luther's three years in the monastery he still was dissatisfied. He didn't feel he was progressing toward true holiness. His conscience was not at peace. The more he endeavored, the more he realized he was a sinner. He expressed this in a poem as such:

*I know that, when I try to be
Upright and just and true to Thee,
I am a sinner still.*

Increasingly, it became clear to him that he could not appease God for his sins by his own deeds. In his desperate search for righteousness before God, he declared, "*I tortured myself almost to death in order to*

procure peace for my troubled heart and agitated conscience; but being surrounded by thick darkness, I found peace nowhere. Every day I went to confession, but that was of no use to me....'Look,' explained I, 'you are still envious, impatient, passionate. It profits you nothing, O wretched man, to have entered this sacred order!'"

Although Luther was descending lower in despair, God was operating. As we are told in the book of Romans, a person calls when he believes, and believes when he hears. Up to this point Luther had heard many things about God, but had not really clearly heard the way of salvation. This was about to change. Since faith comes out of hearing (Romans 10:17), Luther needed someone from whom he could hear the way of salvation. That man seems to have been John Staupitz, an administrator in the Augustinian order. Staupitz noticed Luther's downcast disposition and



asked him why he was so sad. Luther confided in him regarding all his troubles. Staupitz asked him, *"Why do you torment yourself with all these speculations? Behold the wounds of Jesus Christ, the blood that He has shed for you. It is there that the grace of God will appear to you....Throw yourself into the Redeemer's arms. Trust in Him....He became man to give you the assurance of divine favor."*

These words penetrated Luther's heart. He later testified, *"If Dr. Staupitz, or rather God through Dr. Staupitz, had not helped me out of my trials, I should have drowned in them."*

Professor

In 1508 Luther was given a temporary assignment as a professor at the University of Wittenberg, a small village with a population less than 3,000 people. He was appointed to lecture on philosophy. This was a year after he was ordained a priest and was at the age of twenty-five. He continued to study and complete his degree of Bachelor of the Bible. Luther would eventually confound the doctors as he learned to *"stand on the writings of the prophets and apostles and rely on the words of Christ."*

Disappointment in 'Holy Rome'

Luther was later transferred back to Erfurt by his superiors in order to teach at the University of Erfurt for a few years. While at Erfurt he was commissioned to make a trip to Rome to represent the Augustinian order and to help find a solution to some problems of strife. Luther had the highest esteem for the 'holy' city of Rome and was looking forward to representing these matters before the pope. As he approached the seven-hilled city Luther was in awe and proclaimed, *"Hail, thou holy Rome, hail!"*

In the next few weeks he had opportunity to see all the sights in Rome. He became disillusioned: Rome was not the great city of holiness he had imagined. Instead, his impression was that it was a place of worldliness, sin and vice. He was troubled by the mockery that fellow priests made of what he considered sacred things. It was in Rome also that he heard many stories about the evil life of a recent former pope. Luther's feelings changed regarding Rome. Later he said, *"If there is a hell, Rome is built over it!"*

Doubts on Pilate's Staircase

One place in particular in Rome that attracted Luther was the chapel Sancta Sanctorum. It was in this place that the supposed stairway of Pilate's palace was located. This

stairway of twenty-eight steps was transported from Jerusalem to Rome and was said to be the stairway that Jesus climbed in his appearance before Pilate before His crucifixion. A declaration had been made by an earlier pope that whoever crawled this stairway on his knees would receive nine years of forgiveness of sins for every step. Luther began his climb, but in his heart he had doubts. He thought to himself, *"What if it is not true? Then I am yet in my sins! Who knows?"* Therefore he continued in despair, without finding the peace and holiness he longed for.



*What if it is not true?
Then I am yet
in my sins!
Who knows?*

Becoming Wise unto Salvation

Luther eventually was transferred back to Wittenberg to teach theology. There, in 1512, he received the degree of Doctor of Divinity. He later testified, *“When I was made doctor, I did not yet know the light.”*

But it was here at Wittenberg that the light began to dawn. What he had heard from Staupitz gradually began to become his. By God’s mercy that the Scriptures began to illumine him regarding the way of salvation.

Luther was laboring to understand Paul’s writings in Romans. He said, *“I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans.”* Romans 1:17 especially caught his attention, which says that *“the righteousness of God is revealed in it out of faith to faith, as it is written, but the righteous shall have life and live by faith.”*

He had previously hated the phrase, *“the righteousness of God.”* He was always taught that God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though he was living without reproach as a monk and a priest, he still felt he was a sinner before God and would face coming punishment. He testified, *“I could not endure those words, ‘the righteousness of God.’ I had no love for that holy and just God who punishes sinners. I was filled with secret anger against Him.”*

Luther felt crushed under the law of the commandments and threatened by God’s righteousness and wrath. Yet, he met the mercy of God. He declared, *“But when, by the Spirit of God, I understood these words [Rom. 1:17], when I learned how the justification of the sinner proceeds from the free mercy of our Lord through faith, then I felt born again like a new man; I entered through the open doors into the very paradise of God.”*

Luther was born again; he was also justified by faith. He testified, *“And as previously I had detested with all my heart these words, ‘the righteousness of God,’ I began from that hour to value them and to love them as the sweetest and most consoling words in the Bible.”*

His clarity concerning being justified by faith can be seen through a letter to a friend, George Spalatin, in 1516 in an attempt to bring him to a saving faith in Christ. He wrote, *“I should be very glad to know what is the state of your soul. Have you learned to despise your own righteousness and to put your trust in the righteousness of Christ alone? Many do not know the righteousness of God, which is given us abundantly and freely in Christ, but they endeavor to do good works and depend on their own merits. You were full*

of this great error when you were here, and I was full of it. Even now I must fight against it and have not finished. Therefore, my beloved brother, learn Christ and Him crucified. Learn to despair of yourself and to say to Him, ‘Thou, Lord Jesus, are my Righteousness, but I am Thy sin. Thou hast assumed what was mine and given me what was Thine.’”

Luther was enlightened by the word of God as to the way of salvation. He was turning from the way of works to the way of salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

Thou, Lord Jesus, are my Righteousness, but I am Thy sin. Thou hast assumed what was mine and given me what was Thine.

Marty Robert and Bill Lawson

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