

Resurrection Life of Jesus Church

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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PART 6: GOD'S CHOSEN REFORMER

MARTIN LUTHER

Martin Luther was born into The Holy Roman Empire, which at the time was a vast, decentralized collection of territories in Central Europe that claimed political successorship to the ancient Roman Empire. The Holy Roman Empire existed from A.D. 962 to 1806, but by the early 1500s, it was reduced to a patchwork of hundreds of semi-independent states united under the loose authority of an emperor with Roman Catholicism as its official state religion. Luther's reformation would further divide the empire religiously and politically.

Hans and Margarethe Luther welcomed a son on November 10, 1483. He was baptized the next day – St. Martin's Day – and that is how he received his name.

Hans emphasized hard work and obedience and this filled young Martin with a sense of discipline and a fear of authority. Margarethe taught him Bible stories and instilled the conviction that life should be lived under God's authority. The strictness of his upbringing, combined with his parents' devoutness, left Luther with an image of God as severe and demanding, but that would change as he understood God's grace and the role of faith.

Hans wanted Martin to become a lawyer, believing that a career in law would bring honor and stability to the family. Young Luther dutifully studied law at the University of Erfurt where he learned Latin with an emphasis on grammar, rhetoric and logic. He later described those years as a time of purgatory and hell, unaware that the Holy Spirit was using the time to prepare him to confront Romanism, translate the Bible into German, and compose enduring hymns.

Luther entered the University of Erfurt in 1501 at age 17. He earned his Bachelor's degree in 1502 and his Master's degree in 1505. He abandoned a career in law after a near-death experience in a thunderstorm, wherein he vowed to become a monk if God spared his life.

These events in Martin Luther's life initially shaped his understanding of God and the ensuing revelation of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ would ignite a movement that transformed the spiritual landscape of Europe and restored the authority of Scripture as the foundation of Christian faith.

PREDESTINED LOCATION

Most people living outside Germany do not realize that the nation is divided by distinct linguistic regions. High German is spoken in the southern uplands and mountainous regions such as Bavaria, Austria, and Switzerland. Low German is spoken in the northern lowlands of Germany, especially along the North Sea and Baltic coasts. "High" and "low" do not refer to social class or quality, but to the higher elevations of southern Germany and the flat, low-lying terrain to the north.



Low German was closer to the language of early medieval Saxons and resembles Dutch and English more closely. High German developed as the literary and official language, especially after Martin Luther's German Bible, which was written in East Central German, which happened to be a High German dialect.

The Godhead knew in eternity past the language condition of Germany in selecting Martin Luther's parents and the location where they would live. Luther was born in Eisleben, located in the region of Saxony. The dialect spoken there was East Central German, a form of High German. Luther's native dialect became the foundation of his Bible translation, which helped shape what is now called Standard High German.

BECOMING A MONK

Luther wrestled with his eternal fate after finishing his university studies. He was ignorant of salvation by faith in Christ at the age of 22 and decided to become a monk in an effort to make atonement for his soul. Striving to make a clean break from his old life, he gave away his valuable law and philosophy books as a way of showing that he was turning from the pursuit of law, to the spiritual pursuit of God. This act revealed the depth of his commitment to a completely new way of life.

He entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt and devoted himself to prayer, fasting, and rigorous self-discipline, striving to find peace with God, but only succeeded in achieving guilt and fear. Striving to be closer to God, Luther continued his education in theology and was ordained a priest at the age of 24 in 1507. He later studied at the University of Wittenberg, earning his Doctor of Theology in 1512, which qualified him to teach Bible and theology.

Monks of the Augustinian Order went out into the streets with bowls or sacks in hand, begging for food, alms, and supplies to sustain the monastery. This practice was meant to teach humility, dependence for God's provision, and solidarity with the poor. Luther's focus shifted from such novice duties to liturgical responsibilities such as mass once he was ordained a priest.

Every human soul is created by God with a free will and it is obvious from Luther's words that the Holy Spirit was convicting him; however, he sought the wrong source for a solution. He was driven to become a monk by his fear of failing to obtain heaven and tried desperately to be saved every day through his own efforts.

"...I held mass every day, and knew not but that I was going straight to heaven...I chose for myself twenty-one saints, read mass every day, calling upon three of them each day, so as to complete the circuit every week. Especially did I invoke the holy Virgin, as her womanly heart was more easily touched, that she might appease her Son.

I verily thought that by invoking three saints daily, and by letting my body waste away with fasting and watchings, I should satisfy the law, and shield my conscience against the goad of the driver. But it availed me nothing. The further I went this way, the more was I

terrified, so that I should have given over in despair, had not Christ graciously regarded me, and enlightened me with the light of his gospel.”¹

THE MENU

The monks had a program of fasting, followed with three feasts. The evening meal featured two mugs of beer, a small container of wine, spiced cakes, and salted bread.

In the 15th and early 16th centuries, drinking beer and wine was a normal part of daily life, even among clergy and monks. Potable water often did not exist, so beer and wine were considered cleaner and more nourishing. Monasteries brewed their own beer and produced their own wine, both for consumption and for sale. Moderate drinking was accepted, while drunkenness was condemned.

The spiced cakes were sweet pastries or cakes made with ingredients like honey, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, and sometimes dried fruit. They resembled what we would call gingerbread or honey cake. Such treats were reserved for feast days, not for ordinary meals.

Salted bread was made from coarse rye or barley flour with little or no leavening, seasoned lightly with salt, and often stale or dry. It was intentionally unpleasant and plain, eaten as part of the monks’ ascetic lifestyle, which emphasized self-denial and humility.

THE LATIN VULGATE

When Martin Luther entered the monastery, he asked for a Bible and was given the Latin Vulgate, an antiquated and imperfect translation taken from Hebrew and Greek sources. His superiors discouraged him from reading it.

The Latin Vulgate came to be viewed by reformers as a deeply flawed translation of the Bible for several reasons:

1. The Vulgate was translated primarily from the Greek Septuagint for the Old Testament rather than Hebrew manuscripts, introducing layers of error because it utilized secondary sources. (Hebrew → Greek → Latin)
2. Several crucial theological terms were mistranslated in the Vulgate, shaping Roman Catholic doctrine in ways that reformers rejected.
 - a. The Greek “metanoēō” means “to change one’s mind,” but Jerome translated it as “poenitentiam agite” – “do penance.” This shift supported the Romanist system of sacramental penance rather than the inward repentance of the heart.
 - b. The Greek “dikaiosyne” (righteousness) was rendered “justificare,” implying “to make righteous,” as a process. This undergirded the idea that righteousness is infused through sacraments, not imputed by faith.

¹ Sears, Barnas DD; *The Life of Luther*, American Sunday School Union, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2010, p.112

Such botched translations were central to Luther's discovery that the Bible teaches salvation by faith alone, not by works or rituals.

3. The Latin Vulgate was over 1,000 years old by Luther's time. Its vocabulary reflected classical and ecclesiastical Latin, not the language of ordinary people. Most laypeople and even many clergy could not understand it. This made the Bible inaccessible, effectively allowing the papist hierarchy to control its interpretation.
4. Roman Catholicism declared the Vulgate its official and authoritative text, even when it contradicted the original Hebrew and Greek. This prevented correction and Luther insisted that Scripture must be judged by the originals, not by church tradition or Latin authority.

Martin Luther and other reformers like William Tyndale and Erasmus (1466-1536) returned to Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) to correct these errors. Their translations restored scriptural accuracy and gave the common people access to the Word of God in their own language.

THE JOURNEY TO ROME

The Augustinian leadership in Germany was embroiled in a conflict and Luther was commissioned to discuss it with the leadership of the Augustinian monks in Rome. He left on a pilgrimage to Rome in 1510 with an unknown monk companion. It is estimated their journey took 60-75 days to complete with overnight stops at different monasteries along the way.

Martin Luther did not understand biblical salvation and this trip would prove to be eye-opening to the young monk. When they reached the city limit of Rome, Luther fell to his knees and cried out "Salve, Sancta Roma," which is Latin for "Holy Rome, I salute you."

He visited every relic possible, but the sacred sites were at odds with the corruption he witnessed as Romanism monetized the grace of God.

Still seeking forgiveness, he decided to visit the Archbasilica of Saint John in Laterano. The official name is Scala Sancta, which translates "Pontifical Sanctuary of the Holy Stairs." According to tradition, these were the steps that led up to the praetorium of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem. The steps of the stairway had been brought to Rome from Jerusalem in the fourth century by Saint Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine. Adherents climbed their stairs on their knees as an act of penance, devotion, and meditation on the suffering of Christ.

Luther decided to avail himself to an indulgence issued by the Pope. Anyone who wished to take advantage of it simply had to ascend the Scala Sancta one step at a time, pausing to recite the Lord's Prayer on every step. Whoever made it to the top would be given enough grace for themselves and anyone else they paid for to reduce a prescribed number of years from Purgatory.

As Luther ascended the stairs, he heard a voice saying "the just shall live by faith." These were words that he had read many times while lecturing at Wittenberg. It was not until he found himself crawling up a set of stairs to pay for God's grace that the truth of those words was driven home to his soul.

He immediately bolted to his feet, hurried down the stairs, and exited the building. This was a turning point which caused him to dig deeper, ask more questions, and seek the truth about salvation.

The trip to Rome ended in disillusionment and confusion. The beloved city of Roman Catholicism was corrupt, and Luther was appalled at the vice and debauchery among the people, but especially among the clergy, and going even as far as the pope. Luther later wrote, "If there is a Hell, Rome is built over it."