

Fox's Book of Martyrs

A History of the lives, sufferings and triumphant deaths of the early Christian martyrs

Edited by William Byron Forbush

CHAPTER IX

An Account of the Life and Persecutions of Martin Luther

This illustrious German divine and reformer of the Church was the son of John Luther and Margaret Ziegler, and born at Isleben, a town of Saxony, in the county of Mansfield, November 10, 1483. His father's extraction and condition were originally but mean, and his occupation that of a miner; it is probable, however, that by his application and industry he improved the fortunes of his family, as he afterward became a magistrate of rank and dignity. Luther was early initiated into letters, and at the age of thirteen was sent to school at Magdeburg, and thence to Eisenach, in Thuringia, where he remained four years, producing the early indications of his future eminence.

In 1501 he was sent to the University of Erfurt, where he went through the usual courses of logic and philosophy. When twenty, he took a master's degree, and then lectured on Aristotle's physics, ethics, and other parts of philosophy. Afterward, at the instigation of his parents, he turned himself to the civil law, with a view of advancing himself to the bar, but was diverted from this pursuit by the following accident. Walking out into the fields one day, he was struck by lightning so as to fall to the ground, while a companion was killed by his side; and this affected him so sensibly, that, without communicating his purpose to any of his friends, he withdrew himself from the world, and retired into the order of the hermits of St. Augustine.

Here he employed himself in reading St. Augustine and the schoolmen; but in turning over the leaves of the library, he accidentally found a copy of the Latin Bible, which he had never seen before. This raised his curiosity to a high degree: he read it over very greedily, and was amazed to find what a small portion of the Scriptures was rehearsed to the people.

He made his profession in the monastery of Erfurt, after he had been a novice one year; and he took priest's orders, and celebrated his first Mass in 1507. The year after, he was removed from the convent of Erfurt to the University of Wittenberg; for this university being just founded, nothing was thought more likely to bring it into immediate repute and credit, than the authority and presence of a man so celebrated, for his great parts and learning, as Luther.

In this University of Erfurt, there was a certain aged man in the convent of the Augustines with whom Luther, being then of the same order, a friar Augustine, had conference upon divers things, especially touching remission of sins; which article the said aged father opened unto Luther; declaring that God's express commandment is that every man should particularly believe his sins to be forgiven him in Christ: and further said that this interpretation was confirmed by St. Bernard: "This is the testimony that the Holy Ghost giveth thee in thy heart, saying, thy sins are forgiven thee. For this is the opinion of the apostle, that man is freely justified by faith."

By these words Luther was not only strengthened, but was also instructed of the full meaning of St. Paul, who repeateth so many times this sentence, "We are justified by faith." And having read the expositions of many upon this place, he then perceived, as well by the discourse of the old man, as by the comfort he received in his spirit, the vanity of those interpretations, which he had read before, of the schoolmen. And so, by little and little, reading and comparing the sayings and examples of the prophets and apostles, with continual invocation of God, and the excitation of faith by force of prayer, he perceived that doctrine most evidently. Thus continued he his study at Erfurt the space of four years in the convent of the Augustines.

In 1512, seven convents of his order having a quarrel with their vicar-general, Luther was chosen to go to Rome to maintain their cause. At Rome he saw the pope and the court, and had an opportunity of observing also the manners of the clergy, whose hasty, superficial, and impious way of celebrating Mass, he has severely noted. As soon as he had adjusted the dispute which was the business of his journey, he returned to Wittenberg, and was created doctor of divinity, at the expense of Frederic, elector of Saxony; who had often heard him preach, was perfectly acquainted with his merit, and revered him highly.

He continued in the University of Wittenberg, where, as professor of divinity, he employed himself in the business of his calling. Here then he began in the most earnest manner to read lectures upon the sacred books: he explained the Epistle to the Romans, and the Psalms, which he cleared up and illustrated in a manner so entirely new, and so different from what had been pursued by former commentators, that "there seemed, after a long and dark night, a new day to arise, in the judgment of all pious and prudent men."

Luther diligently reduced the minds of men to the Son of God: as John the Baptist demonstrated the Lamb of God that took away the sins of the world, even so Luther, shining in the Church as the bright daylight after a long and dark night, expressly showed

that sins are freely remitted for the love of the Son of God, and that we ought faithfully to embrace this bountiful gift.

His life was correspondent to his profession; and it plainly appeared that his words were no lip-labor, but proceeded from the very heart. This admiration of his holy life much allured the hearts of his auditors.

The better to qualify himself for the task he had undertaken, he had applied himself attentively to the Greek and Hebrew languages; and in this manner was he employed, when the general indulgences were published in 1517.

Leo X who succeeded Julius II in March, 1513, formed a design of building the magnificent Church of St. Peter's at Rome, which was, indeed, begun by Julius, but still required very large sums to be finished. Leo, therefore, in 1517 published general indulgences throughout all Europe, in favor of those who contribute any sum to the building of St. Peter's; and appointed persons in different countries to preach up these indulgences, and to receive money for them. These strange proceedings gave vast offence at Wittenberg, and particularly inflamed the pious zeal of Luther; who, being naturally warm and active, and in the present case unable to contain himself, was determined to declare against them at all adventures.

Upon the eve of All-saints, therefore, in 1517, he publicly fixed up, at the church next to the castle of that town, a thesis upon indulgences; in the beginning of which he challenged any one to oppose it either by writing or disputation. Luther's propositions about indulgences were no sooner published, than Tetzel, the Dominican friar, and commissioner for selling them, maintained and published at Frankfort, a thesis, containing a set of propositions directly contrary to them. He did more; he stirred up the clergy of his order against Luther; anathematized him from the pulpit, as a most damnable heretic; and burnt his thesis publicly at Frankfort. Tetzel's thesis was also burnt, in return, by the Lutherans at Wittenberg; but Luther himself disowned having had any hand in that procedure.

In 1518, Luther, though dissuaded from it by his friends, yet, to show obedience to authority, went to the monastery of St. Augustine, at Heidelberg, while the chapter was held; and here maintained, April 26, a dispute concerning "justification by faith"; which Bucer, who was present at, took down in writing, and afterward communicated to Beatus Rhenanus, not without the highest commendations.

In the meantime, the zeal of his adversaries grew every day more and more active against him; and he was at length accused to Leo X as a heretic. As soon as he returned therefore from Heidelberg, he wrote a letter to that pope, in the most submissive terms; and sent him, at the same time, an explication of his propositions about indulgences. This letter is dated on Trinity Sunday, 1518, and was accompanied with a protestation, wherein he declared, that he did not pretend to advance or defend anything contrary to the Holy Scriptures, or to the doctrine of the fathers, received and observed by the Church of Rome, or to the canons and decretals of the popes: nevertheless, he thought he had the

liberty either to approve or disapprove the opinions of St. Thomas, Bonaventure, and other schoolmen and canonists, which are not grounded upon any text.

The emperor Maximilian was equally solicitous, with the pope about putting a stop to the propagation of Luther's opinions in Saxony; troublesome both to the Church and empire. Maximilian, therefore, applied to Leo, in a letter dated August 5, 1518, and begged him to forbid, by his authority, these useless, rash, and dangerous disputes; assuring him also that he would strictly execute in the empire whatever his holiness should enjoin.

In the meantime Luther, as soon as he understood what was transacting about him at Rome, used all imaginable means to prevent his being carried thither, and to obtain a hearing of his cause in Germany. The elector was also against Luther's going to Rome, and desired of Cardinal Cajetan, that he might be heard before him, as the pope's legate in Germany. Upon these addresses, the pope consented that the cause should be tried before Cardinal Cajetan, to whom he had given power to decide it.

Luther, therefore, set off immediately for Augsburg, and carried with him letters from the elector. He arrived here in October, 1518, and, upon an assurance of his safety, was admitted into the cardinal's presence. But Luther was soon convinced that he had more to fear from the cardinal's power than from disputations of any kind; and, therefore, apprehensive of being seized if he did not submit, withdrew from Augsburg upon the twentieth. But, before his departure, he published a formal appeal to the pope, and finding himself protected by the elector, continued to teach the same doctrines at Wittenberg, and sent a challenge to all the inquisitors to come and dispute with him.

As to Luther, Miltitius, the pope's chamberlain, had orders to require the elector to oblige him to retract, or to deny him his protection: but things were not now to be carried with so high a hand, Luther's credit being too firmly established. Besides, the emperor Maximilian happened to die upon the twelfth of this month, whose death greatly altered the face of affairs, and made the elector more able to determine Luther's fate. Miltitius thought it best, therefore, to try what could be done by fair and gentle means, and to that end came to some conference with Luther.

During all these treaties, the doctrine of Luther spread, and prevailed greatly; and he himself received great encouragement at home and abroad. The Bohemians about this time sent him a book of the celebrated John Huss, who had fallen a martyr in the work of reformation; and also letters, in which they exhorted him to constancy and perseverance, owning that the divinity which he taught was the pure, sound, and orthodox divinity. Many great and learned men had joined themselves to him.

In 1519, he had a famous dispute at Leipsic with John Eccius. But this dispute ended at length like all others, the parties not the least nearer in opinion, but more at enmity with each other's persons.

About the end of this year, Luther published a book, in which he contended for the Communion being celebrated in both kinds; which was condemned by the bishop of Misnia, January 24, 1520.

While Luther was laboring to excuse himself to the new emperor and the bishops of Germany, Eccius had gone to Rome, to solicit his condemnation; which, it may easily be conceived, was now become not difficult to be attained. Indeed the continual importunities of Luther's adversaries with Leo, caused him at length to publish a formal condemnation of him, and he did so accordingly, in a bull, dated June 15, 1520. This was carried into Germany, and published there by Eccius, who had solicited it at Rome; and who, together with Jerome Alexander, a person eminent for his learning and eloquence, was intrusted by the pope with the execution of it. In the meantime, Charles V of Spain, after he had set things to rights in the Low Countries, went into Germany, and was crowned emperor, October the twenty-first at Aix-la-Chapelle.

Martin Luther, after he had been first accused at Rome upon Maunday Thursday by the pope's censure, shortly after Easter speedeth his journey toward Worms, where the said Luther, appearing before the emperor and all the states of Germany, constantly stuck to the truth, defended himself, and answered his adversaries.

Luther was lodged, well entertained, and visited by many earls, barons, knights of the order, gentlemen, priests, and the commonalty, who frequented his lodging until night.

He came, contrary to the expectation of many, as well adversaries as others. His friends deliberated together, and many persuaded him not to adventure himself to such a present danger, considering how these beginnings answered not the faith of promise made. Who, when he had heard their whole persuasion and advice, answered in this wise: "As touching me, since I am sent for, I am resolved and certainly determined to enter Worms, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; yea, although I knew there were as many devils to resist me as there are tiles to cover the houses in Worms."

The next day, the herald brought him from his lodging to the emperor's court, where he abode until six o'clock, for that the princes were occupied in grave consultations; abiding there, and being environed with a great number of people, and almost smothered for the press that was there. Then after, when the princes were set, and Luther entered, Eccius, the official, spake in this manner: "Answer now to the Emperor's demand. Wilt thou maintain all thy books which thou hast acknowledged, or revoke any part of them, and submit thyself?"

Martin Luther answered modestly and lowly, and yet not without some stoutness of stomach, and Christian constancy. "Considering your sovereign majesty, and your honors, require a plain answer; this I say and profess as resolutely as I may, without doubting or sophistication, that if I be not convinced by testimonies of the Scriptures (for I believe not the pope, neither his general Councils, which have erred many times, and have been contrary to themselves), my conscience is so bound and captivated in these Scriptures and the Word of God, that I will not, nor may not revoke any manner of thing;

considering it is not godly or lawful to do anything against conscience. Hereupon I stand and rest: I have not what else to say. God have mercy upon me!"

The princes consulted together upon this answer given by Luther; and when they had diligently examined the same, the prolocutor began to repel him thus:

"The Emperor's majesty requireth of thee a simple answer, either negative or affirmative, whether thou mindest to defend all thy works as Christian, or no?"

Then Luther, turning to the emperor and the nobles, besought them not to force or compel him to yield against his conscience, confirmed with the Holy Scriptures, without manifest arguments alleged to the contrary by his adversaries. "I am tied by the Scriptures."

Before the Diet of Worms was dissolved, Charles V caused an edict to be drawn up, which was dated the eighth of May, and decreed that Martin Luther be, agreeably to the sentence of the pope, henceforward looked upon as a member separated from the Church, a schismatic, and an obstinate and notorious heretic. While the bull of Leo X executed by Charles V was thundering throughout the empire, Luther was safely shut up in the castle of Wittenberg; but weary at length of his retirement, he appeared publicly again at Wittenberg, March 6, 1522, after he had been absent about ten months.

Luther now made open war with the pope and bishops; and, that he might make the people despise their authority as much as possible, he wrote one book against the pope's bull, and another against the order falsely called "The Order of Bishops." He published also a translation of the New Testament in the German tongue, which was afterward corrected by himself and Melancthon.

Affairs were now in great confusion in Germany; and they were not less so in Italy, for a quarrel arose between the pope and the emperor, during which Rome was twice taken, and the pope imprisoned. While the princes were thus employed in quarrelling with each other, Luther persisted in carrying on the work of the Reformation, as well by opposing the papists, as by combating the Anabaptists and other fanatical sects; which, having taken the advantage of his contest with the Church of Rome, had sprung up and established themselves in several places.

In 1527, Luther was suddenly seized with a coagulation of the blood about the heart, which had like to have put an end to his life. The troubles of Germany being not likely to have any end, the emperor was forced to call a diet at Spires, in 1529, to require the assistance of the princes of the empire against the Turks. Fourteen cities, viz., Strassburg, Nuremberg, Ulm, Constance, Retlingen, Windsheim, Memmingen, Lindow, Kempten, Hailbron, Isny, Weissemburg, Nortlingen, S. Gal, joined against the decree of the Diet protestation, which was put into writing, and published April, 1529. This was the famous protestation, which gave the name of "Protestants" to the reformers in Germany.

After this, the Protestant princes labored to make a firm league and enjoined the elector of Saxony and his allies to approve of what the Diet had done; but the deputies drew up

an appeal, and the Protestants afterwards presented an apology for their "Confession"-that famous confession which was drawn up by the temperate Melancthon, as also the apology. These were signed by a variety of princes, and Luther had now nothing else to do, but to sit down and contemplate the mighty work he had finished: for that a single monk should be able to give the Church of Rome so rude a shock, that there needed but such another entirely to overthrow it, may be well esteemed a mighty work.

In 1533, Luther wrote a consolatory epistle to the citizens of Oschatz, who had suffered some hardships for adhering to the Augsburg confession of faith: and in 1534, the Bible translated by him into German was first printed, as the old privilege, dated at Bibliopolis, under the elector's own hand, shows; and it was published in the year after. He also published this year a book, "Against Masses and the Consecration of Priests."

In February, 1537, an assembly was held at Smalkald about matters of religion, to which Luther and Melancthon were called. At this meeting Luther was seized with so grievous an illness that there was no hope of his recovery. As he was carried along he made his will, in which he bequeathed his detestation of popery to his friends and brethren. In this manner was he employed until his death, which happened in 1546.

That year, accompanied by Melancthon, he paid a visit to his own country, which he had not seen for many years, and returned again in safety. But soon after, he was called thither again by the earls of Manfelt, to compose some differences which had arisen about their boundaries, where he was received by one hundred horsemen, or more, and conducted in a very honorable manner; but was at the same time so very ill that it was feared he would die. He said that these fits of sickness often came upon him, when he had any great business to undertake. Of this, however, he did not recover, but died in February 18, in his sixty-third year. A little before he expired, he admonished those that were about him to pray to God for the propagation of the Gospel, "Because," said he, "the Council of Trent, which had set once or twice, and the pope, will devise strange things against it." Feeling his fatal hour to approach, before nine o'clock in the morning, he commended himself to God with this devout prayer:

"My heavenly Father, eternal and merciful God! Thou hast manifested unto me Thy dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. I have taught Him, I have known Him; I love Him as my life, my health and my redemption; Whom the wicked have persecuted, maligned, and with injury afflicted. Draw my soul to Thee."

After this he said as ensueth, thrice: "I commend my spirit into Thy hands, Thou hast redeemed me, O God of Truth! 'God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have life everlasting.'" Having repeated oftentimes his prayers, he was called to God. So praying, his innocent ghost peaceably was separated from the earthly body.