A stained glass window depicting Martin Luther, a man in a black robe pointing to an open book. The window features intricate green and gold patterns. The text "LIFE OF MARTIN LUTHER" is overlaid in large, bold, yellow letters.

LIFE OF MARTIN LUTHER

DIANA KLEYN AND JOEL BEEKE

LIFE OF MARTIN LUTHER

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MARTIN LUTHER

(1483–1546)

His youth

The best-known Reformer whom God used to usher in the Reformation is Martin Luther. He was born in a small town called Eisleben on November 10, 1483. He was named Martin for the simple reason that the day on which he was born was called St. Martin's Day in the Roman Catholic Church. It is said that his father prayed aloud at the bedside of his newborn son, asking God to grant him grace that he might become known for learning and piety.

Shortly after Martin was born, his family moved to Mansfeld, where his father, Hans, owned a small business mining copper-bearing shale. This eased some of the harsh poverty the family had endured. Hans Luther determined to give his son a good education. Martin's teachers certainly taught him his subjects, but educators in those days were very harsh. They believed that beating boys was the best way to make them learn. Poor Martin once received fifteen whippings in a single day at school!

His studies

Young Martin attended the village school of Mansfeld. After that, he most likely attended the Cathedral School at Magdeburg to continue his studies. Many of the students were poor and not well provided for. Luther was one of these boys. Often they went from door to door begging for some food. At Christmas time, they would sing carols as a way to earn their food. Sometimes people were kind and gave them something to eat, but many times the boys were scolded and chased away.

After a short time at Magdeburg, Martin's father transferred him to Eisenach, where he studied for four years at the Georgenschule. Here also, Luther had to beg for food with the other poor scholars. One day after being sent away from several houses, Luther was discouraged. Feeling faint with hunger, he wondered if he should give up studying and go to work with his father in the mines. But the door of the next home opened, and the kind lady of the house called to him. Her name was Ursula Cotta. She felt sorry for him and gave him a good meal. She told him to come back often. This woman and her family cheerfully provided for many of Luther's needs.

When he was eighteen, Luther went to university in the town of Erfurt and began to study law. The University of Erfurt was one of the oldest and most famous universities in Germany at the time. His father worked hard to pay for Martin's education. He was very proud of his son, and although he knew it would cost a great deal of money, he was willing to pay it because he wanted his son to become a famous lawyer. Here, young Luther spent about seven years in study. He learned quickly and soon became one of the best students in the university.

One of Luther's favorite things to do when his work was done for the day was to go to the library to read. One day, to his delight, he discovered a copy of the Latin Bible.¹ It was the first time he had ever seen a Bible! He had heard the priests recite several passages of Scripture but never realized the Bible was such a big book. As he carefully turned the pages, he came across the story of Samuel and his mother Hannah. With joy and delight Luther read this story. What a wonderful Book this was! He would have loved to have a copy of his own, but books were scarce and it seemed impossible that he would ever own one.

He becomes a monk

Not long after this, Luther decided to give up the study of law and to begin the study of theology, which literally means "the study of God." Two things happened that led him to this decision. One of these was the sudden death of a friend whom he loved very much. When he heard of it, he asked himself, "What would become of me if I were to die suddenly?"

About the same time, during the summer of 1505, while returning to Erfurt after visiting his parents, he was overtaken by a violent storm. Suddenly, a lightning bolt fell almost at his feet. Overcome with fear, he dropped to his knees and prayed to Saint Anne to save him. When he arose unhurt, he believed that the saint had saved him. He felt he had to do something to show his gratitude, so he said, "I must become holy." He made a vow that he would change his life and become a priest.

These two events transformed his life. His friends were surprised. His father was not pleased: he had worked so hard for Martin's education! He had hoped that Martin would make himself known in the world and perhaps become rich as well as famous as a doctor of law. Now all these hopes were dashed when Martin entered the monastery. Monks were not respected very much in that time. People knew that many of the monks led lives of luxury—wealth they had taken from the people. Martin's father believed that his son had broken the fifth commandment: "Honour thy father and thy mother" (Exodus 20:12a).

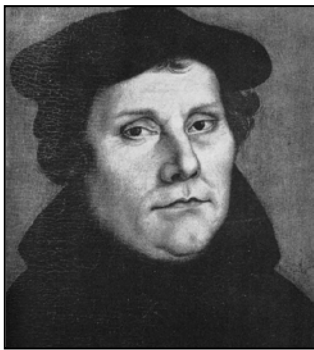
Convinced it was the right thing to do, Luther left the university and entered the monastery of the Observant Augustinian Friars in Erfurt on July 17, 1505. Monks were supposed to live very strict lives, and they professed to be very religious. The Bible Luther had read at college had made him think seriously about God and his soul, but like the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, he needed someone to explain the Scriptures to him.

¹ **Latin Bible** – late 4th-century Latin translation of the Bible. It was largely the work of Jerome, who was commissioned by Pope Damasus I in AD 382 to make a new revision of older Latin translations. By the 13th century this revision had come to be called *versio vulgate*, that is, the "commonly used translation," or the Vulgate. It ultimately became the official Latin version of the Bible in the Roman Catholic Church.

He tries to find peace

Luther tried to win God's favor by praying and fasting often. He whipped himself and lived in a cell that had no heat. He slept very little and recited many prayers. He tried to think of every sin he had committed so that he could do penance² for them all, but that did not make him feel any better. He did not know that a sinner can only be saved through faith in Jesus Christ. He did not know about the love of God. Rather, whenever he heard about God, he was afraid. Luther's trust was not in the Savior, but in saints and angels, good works, doing penance, and paying for his own sins. Luther, along with other Roman Catholics, had been taught that God was so holy that He could only be approached through the saints. No one had told him that the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ alone can satisfy God's justice.

The monks with whom Luther lived knew even less than he did. They were more interested in his physical labor than in his spiritual welfare. They made him stand watch at the gates, sweep the church, help in the kitchen, and clean the rooms.



When he finished his chores, they often said to him, "Go with your bag into the town." That meant he had to beg for food for the monks living in the monastery. For these monks, living in a monastery meant observing a religion based on a long list of do's and don'ts. They did not understand that serving God is a matter of the heart.

Most monks and other clergy members of the Roman Catholic Church did not think much about their souls. They obeyed the rules because it was required of them by the church. But most often, their obedience was done out of a sense of duty. In addition, it is sad to say that most of the clergy lived a wicked life, even though they professed to serve God. They seemed pious during religious ceremonies, but their lifestyles were full of sin and injustice.

Luther, however, was different. The Holy Spirit would not allow him to be like the others. For that reason, he could find no peace in the monastery and its rituals. "What will deliver me from my sins and make me holy?" he sighed. "How shall I make peace with a just God? How shall I appear before Him?" He could find no answers.

Some of the other monks thought he was foolish, but some were sympathetic. One old monk in particular pitied Luther. When Luther did not come out of his cell for a whole day, this monk became concerned. Knowing his love of music, the monk took some of the choir boys and knocked at the door of Luther's cell. When there was no response, he became alarmed and broke open the door. There was Luther, unconscious on the floor. They tried to arouse him but could not. So the monk asked the

² **penance** – acts of humiliation to show sorrow for sin.

boys to sing. Finally Luther regained consciousness. As much as he tried, he simply could not find peace!

After he had been in the monastery for some time, Luther came across another copy of the Bible. He could not take it to his cell because it was chained to the wall. Anytime he could slip away unnoticed, however, he would read this precious book and even memorize long passages.

Johann von Staupitz

Johann von Staupitz, vicar³ of the German Observant Augustinian Friars, came to visit the monastery where Luther lived. When he saw how sickly Luther looked, he asked, “Why are you so sad, brother Martin?”

“I do not know what will become of me,” answered Luther. “I promise God I will do better, but I find it is useless to make promises to God because sin is stronger than I am.”

Von Staupitz did not fully understand the struggle Luther was experiencing, but he wanted to help him. “My friend,” replied von Staupitz, “look at the wounds of Jesus Christ and think of why He came into the world.”

Though von Staupitz pointed him in the right direction, Luther was afraid of God and of His Son Jesus. He thought of God only as one who punishes sin. Von Staupitz tried to encourage Luther. “God is not angry with you. Christ Jesus does not want to terrify you; He comforts those in trouble and distress. He became man to give you the promise of deliverance. By His stripes we are healed. By His blood our sins are washed away. Love Him Who first loved you.” But Luther didn’t understand.

He becomes a priest

Luther was ordained a priest on May 2, 1507, when he was twenty-three years old. He began to do as much good as he could by visiting the poor and preaching and teaching as well as he knew how. Being a priest meant that he could perform the sacrament of the mass. He listened to people as they confessed their sins to him. He would sit in a little room that had a curtain between the priest and the person confessing his or her sins. Then Luther would have to decide what the punishment for the sins would be. Perhaps he would tell them to recite the Lord’s Prayer twenty-five times, or give an offering to the church, or fast for three days. When the person had completed the penance, Luther could tell them their sins were forgiven.⁴ This was one of the tasks of the priest.

³ **vicar** – church officer who represents the pope or a bishop in the Roman Catholic Church.

⁴ Sins can be forgiven by God alone, and the Bible makes clear that His forgiveness is based on the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ (Mat 26:28; Act 10:43; Rom 3:25), not on man’s works (Eph 2:8-9; Ti 3:5).

Wittenberg

In 1508, he was invited by Frederick, Prince of Saxony, to move to the town of Wittenberg to become a professor of moral philosophy in the university there. A chapel was part of the university campus, and Luther was asked to take his turn with other professors to preach to the monks, professors, students, and townspeople who came to listen. Before long, Luther became popular as a teacher and a preacher in the university. Later he became a preacher in the town church of Wittenberg. He preached at this church for the rest of his life. When he first began his teaching and preaching, however, he did not yet understand the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A visit to Rome

One thing that opened Luther's eyes to see the great errors of the church was his trip to the city of Rome in 1510. The pope lives there at the Vatican, the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther expected to find the church very pure, and the priests, bishops, and cardinals to be godly men. He looked forward to having spiritual conversations and receiving guidance from these high-ranking religious leaders. He was, however, greatly disappointed. He found that Rome was one of the most corrupt places he had ever visited. The church was full of all sorts of errors and sin. Most of the priests were self-serving men who did not seem to believe the things they were teaching the people.

In a chapel connected with one of the main churches in Rome, there is a flight of white marble steps called the *Scala Sancta*, which means "holy stairs." The priests claimed that these stairs were the very same stairs Jesus climbed when He went from Pilate's judgment hall to Calvary, and that an angel transferred them from Jerusalem to Rome. They also informed the people that whoever went up these stairs on his knees would have all his sins forgiven. Tradition says that Luther went up these steps on his knees, praying and kissing each step. How Luther hoped to find peace for his troubled soul! But his hopes were cruelly dashed. He did not understand why he could not find peace. The Lord had a reason for all of this unrest, however. He was showing Luther his own sin, the wickedness of the church, and the necessity of finding salvation only in Christ. The Lord was graciously leading him, even though Luther believed God was full of wrath and ready to destroy him.

When Luther returned to Wittenberg, he continued to teach his students and to preach in the chapel that was part of the castle of Wittenberg. In his room, he continued to study, pray, and fast. In 1512, he attained his doctoral degree. But he still had no rest for his soul. No matter how he studied, prayed, and punished himself, he never felt as though his sins were forgiven.

The just shall live by faith

Finally, a breakthrough came. Luther was studying the book of Romans, and when he came to verse 17 of the first chapter, he suddenly understood! "The just shall live by

faith,” it said. Now he saw it clearly! Salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ, not by anything we can do.

Luther’s life proves this to us. For years he tried to pay for his sin through his own merits, but he never found rest for his soul. Now, however, the Holy Spirit opened his eyes, and he saw that he could find forgiveness only because of what Jesus Christ had done. Now he understood that God was not an angry God, eager to destroy him, but a patient and loving Father Who had sent His only Son to suffer and die for the sins of His people. In Christ’s righteousness, God’s wrath was satisfied, and sinners who believed in Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit were saved. Luther was so overjoyed with his new discovery that he later wrote that he felt as if his soul went through the open gates of a heavenly paradise.⁵

Luther became a changed man. He no longer tried to pay for his own sins, but he trusted in his Savior. Now he wanted to obey God, not out of fear, but out of love. His teaching and his preaching also changed. He told people what he had discovered in God’s Word. His preaching and teaching were full of the righteousness and love of Christ Jesus.

Johann Tetzel

At last, the time came when God called Luther to begin the work of the Reformation. It began when the church sold indulgences in Wittenberg. Indulgences were pieces of paper signed or stamped with the pope’s name. An indulgence declared that the person who bought that piece of paper had all his sins forgiven, even the sins he would commit in the future! He did not have to do penance for his sins; the paper was enough. When a man named Johann Tetzel came to sell indulgences in Luther’s area, Luther spoke out against this practice.

Tetzel set up a table in the town square. Some of the monks who were with him set up a red flag that had the pope’s coat of arms on it, and then they seated themselves behind the table. “Come near,” shouted Tetzel, “and I will give you indulgences, letters sealed by the pope. Even the sins you do in the future shall all be forgiven you. Repentance is not necessary.⁶ What’s more, these letters will not only save the living, but also the dead! The very moment the money clinks against the bottom of the chest, the soul escapes from purgatory, and flies up to heaven. Bring your money! Bring your money!” A popular rhyme in those days ran,

*When the coin in the coffer rings,
The soul from purgatory springs.*

⁵ See “Luther’s Conversion” by Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), a gospel tract available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

⁶ See *Repentance, What Saith the Scriptures* by A. W. Pink (1886-1952) and Free Grace Broadcaster 203, *Repentance*; both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

Purgatory, the Roman Catholics believed, was a place of punishment where souls were purged, or cleansed, from sin by fire. They said the soul had to remain in purgatory until it was ready to go to heaven. Of course, Tetzel and the pope were wrong. It was all a terrible lie. Money and pieces of paper cannot save people from their sins. Besides, the money collected from the sale of indulgences was being used by the pope and the clergy to build beautiful churches and to live in luxury themselves.⁷

Luther was determined to stop this corrupt sale of indulgences. He spoke and preached against it. He proved from the Bible that this practice was false. He clearly and boldly declared that man can only be saved by the atoning⁸ blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The ninety-five theses

Because of Tetzel's sale of indulgences, Luther wrote ninety-five theses, or statements, that explained that salvation was only in Christ. They also explained what was wrong in the church. He took this paper and nailed it to the church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517.⁹ The Lord used the ninety-five theses to begin the Reformation. The theses were written in Latin, but within weeks people translated them into German and nearly every European language so people all over Europe could understand them. People had become more and more dissatisfied with the doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Eagerly they read Luther's theses. Many people agreed with Luther. The corruption must be stopped; the truth must be proclaimed. The Reformation had truly begun!

At first, Tetzel, the bishops, and the pope ignored Luther's protest, thinking it would pass. But when they realized that more and more people agreed with Luther, they began to worry. Soon they became angry, because people were not buying as many indulgences as before, and that meant less money for them.

Luther summoned by the pope

Some time after this, Luther received a letter from the pope. The pope ordered him to stop preaching against the church and to retract what he had been saying and writing. Luther wrote back immediately saying he could not comply with this order. In reply, the pope demanded that Luther go to Rome to meet with him there. Luther's friends couldn't help but remember what had happened to John Huss. The pope had also ordered Huss to appear before him, and he had been captured and

⁷ Tetzel's travels during this time were for the express purpose of raising funds to build St. Peter's Cathedral at the Vatican in Rome. See *The Church in History: A Glorious Institution*, a history of the Christian church from the second century through the mid-1900s; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

⁸ **atoning** – that which brings reconciliation by paying the debt owed for an offense. See Free Grace Broadcaster 227, *The Atonement*; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

⁹ Luther's posting of the theses was not for the purpose of separating from the Roman Catholic Church, but a sincere request for a public debate about his concerns for reform in the church.

killed even though he had been promised the pope's protection. For this reason, Luther refused to go to Rome.

The pope tried another plan. He wrote to Frederick the Wise, the Elector of Saxony, telling Frederick that he had to send Luther to Rome. But Frederick the Wise, who was Luther's friend, asked the pope to send representatives to Germany to deal with Luther. Meetings with Cardinal Cajetan in October 1518, and Karl von Miltz in January 1519, failed to get Luther to recant. These papal delegates tried to force Luther to take back everything he said against Roman Catholic teaching, but it soon became clear that Luther knew much more about the Bible than they did. He refused to retract anything he had said or written since it was based on God's Word.

Realizing these men were terribly angry with him and that he was now in danger, Luther left the city during the night. His friends helped him escape because they feared the pope and his men would probably try to arrest him and put him in prison. God protected His brave servant because there was still much work for him to do.

Johann Eck

Johann Eck was a man who defended the [Roman Catholic] church. He wrote booklets against Luther, saying that he was a heretic just like John Huss. Eck and Luther had debates, discussing the differences between their beliefs. At one debate in Leipzig in the summer of 1519, Eck got Luther to say that the pope was in error. Luther stated that Scripture is the Word of God and there are no mistakes in God's Word. If there is a disagreement between the pope and the Bible, we must agree with God's Word rather than the pope's. Eck thought he had won the debate when he got Luther to say that he believed the pope was not the supreme truth, but many people believed Luther was the real winner because he boldly stated the truth.

Luther burns the papal bull

When Eck went back to Rome, he persuaded Pope Leo X to accuse Luther of being a heretic. With Eck's prodding, the pope threatened to excommunicate Luther. In the summer of 1520, Luther was ordered to go to Rome and retract everything he had said and written against the doctrines of the church. He had sixty days to do so. The pope added that if Luther refused, he would be persecuted in this life and in the life to come. This letter from the pope was called a papal bull ("bull" comes from a Latin word meaning "seal," so "papal bull" means "a special document or command from the pope").

Although Luther did reply to the pope, he also made his convictions clear in another way. On December 10, 1520, he and his friends made a fire and burned the papal bull. He also burned a book which taught that the pope was the supreme ruler of the church. This was an obvious insult to the pope, but Luther refused to listen to people who did not obey God and who wanted him to disobey God, too. By this action, he cut himself off from the church. He was excommunicated on January 3, 1521. No longer

was he a member of the Roman Catholic Church. Many people in Wittenberg were glad; they agreed with Martin Luther.



Luther burning the papal bull

Important writings

During 1520, Luther completed three important books in which he stated his views. In the first, *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, he urged the German princes to reform the churches and society since the Roman Catholic Church was in such a sad state of corruption. In *A Prelude Concerning the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, he attacked the church's theology of sacraments. Luther maintained there were only two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, or at most three, with penance possibly qualifying as a third;¹⁰ the Roman Catholic Church taught that there were seven. He also denied the doctrine of transubstantiation.¹¹ The third pamphlet, *On the Freedom of a Christian Man*, defined Luther's position on justification and good works.

The Diet of Worms

In the early 1520s, Luther and his friends continued to preach and teach the gospel. By way of Luther's preaching and writing, the doctrines of the Bible were spreading rapidly. Many people in Germany, Switzerland, France, England, and other countries were leaving the Roman Catholic Church and joining the churches of the

¹⁰ **penance** – in Luther's theology, penance consisted of confession to a pastor and receiving his statement of forgiveness on God's behalf. Contrary to the Catholic teaching that the priest actually forgave one's sins, Luther taught that the pastor merely verbally affirmed God's forgiveness taught in the Scriptures. While the Bible teaches believers to confess their sins at times to one another (Jam 5:16), it does not make it a formal rite always required for the forgiveness of sins. We must always confess our sins to God and seek forgiveness directly from Him because of the merit of Christ's atoning work (1Jo 1:9).

¹¹ **transubstantiation** – doctrine that Christ's physical body and blood are present in the bread and wine of the Lord Supper, held to this day by the Roman Catholic Church.

Protestants. The pope was alarmed. He had not been able to stop Luther. God had given Luther powerful friends who stood by him and protected him.

The pope met with Charles V,¹² the emperor of Germany, and together they decided to call a meeting. This meeting was called the Diet of Worms. “Diet” means “meeting,” and Worms was the name of the city where the meeting was held. Luther was summoned to appear before this Diet. The pope and the emperor hoped to do one of two things: either they would get Luther to recant, or else they would get the authority of this Diet to put him to death.

Martin Luther’s friends were frightened. Even though Luther had been given a safe conduct, again they couldn’t help but think about John Huss. He also had been given the pope’s promise that he would be protected, but he had been burned at the stake. Luther, however, assured them that he was not afraid. He believed the Lord wanted him to go to Worms. “Even if there were as many devils in Worms as there are tiles on the rooftops, I must go,” he said firmly.



Luther at the Diet of Worms

The Diet of Worms, held on April 18, 1521, was a grand assembly. Princes, rulers, and many important people were present. Emperor Charles V and his brother, the Archduke Ferdinand, were there. Also present was the Archbishop of Treves, who represented the pope. The chancellor of the archbishop asked Luther questions during the trial. Some of Luther’s friends were there, too. Frederick the Wise, the Elector of Saxony, was one of the most powerful of the German princes. In the great hall in the palace in which the Diet was held, a crowd of thousands of people had gathered as well.

¹² **Charles V** (1500-1558) – ruler of both the Spanish Empire from 1516 and the Holy Roman Empire from 1519. Charles was the heir of three of Europe’s leading dynasties: the Houses of Valois-Burgundy (Netherlands), Habsburg (Austria and the Holy Roman Empire), and Trastámara (Spain, including for the first time Castile and Aragon, which included colonies in the Americas and Asia and a Mediterranean empire extending to Southern Italy).

When Luther entered, there was great excitement. Everyone wanted to see him. The archbishop's chancellor stood up and said in a loud, clear voice that there were two questions Luther had to answer. Pointing to some books on a table, he asked Luther, "Did you write those books?"

Luther asked what the titles were. When he recognized the titles, he answered, "Yes, I wrote them."

"Will you retract everything in these books that is against the Church of Rome?" was the next question.

Luther asked for some time to think and pray before answering this question. The emperor told him he would have until the next day.

When the Diet met again the following day, Luther was asked to give his answer. He made a long speech, first in German, then in Latin. In this speech, he said that if it could be proven that anything in his books was not in agreement with the Scriptures, he would at once retract it, but if not, he could take back nothing. When they urged him again to take back his writings, he repeated what he had said before. Then he said, "Unless I am convinced by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments that I am in error—for popes and councils have often erred and contradicted themselves—I cannot withdraw, for I am subject to the Scriptures I have quoted; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. It is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against one's conscience." He concluded with these famous words, "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. God help me! Amen!"

Luther's friends rejoiced, but his enemies were angry. They tried to convince the emperor to break his promise of safe conduct. But the emperor was afraid that the people would revolt if he did so. Instead, he ordered Luther to leave the city at once. As soon as Luther left, however, the emperor declared that anyone was allowed to kill him. The pope also stated that Luther was forbidden to preach and all his writings must be burned. This declaration was called the Edict of Worms.

Luther is captured

On the way home from Worms, Luther had an unsettling experience. His friends found out that there was a plan to capture him, so they made plans of their own. As Luther was riding homeward through the forest, several masked, armed men suddenly opened the door of the carriage in which he rode, pulled him out, placed him on a horse, and rode away with him. They rode a long time, until they came to the castle of Wartburg. At first Luther did not realize who his captors were. You can imagine how relieved he was when he discovered they were his friends! Frederick the Wise had arranged his capture and hid him in the castle for almost a year.

During this time, Luther wrote a series of pamphlets attacking Roman Catholic practices and began his German translation of the Bible. The translation of the New Testament was finished in the autumn of 1522, but it wasn't until 1542 that Luther,

with the help of friends, completed the translation of the entire Bible. He also wrote letters to other friends, but he did not sign his name on them. His friends knew then that Luther was safe, though they had no idea where he was or who had “captured” him.



The Castle at Wartburg

While Luther was at Wartburg Castle, there was unrest in Wittenberg. Some people who claimed to follow Luther destroyed images, artwork, altars, and crucifixes.¹³ This type of destruction is called iconoclasm. While Luther did speak against the wrongs of the Roman Catholic Church, he did not believe in riots and destruction. In March 1522, Luther went back to Wittenberg, though it meant he put himself in danger of being arrested and killed. He believed he was needed in Wittenberg, and he began to preach and teach the people as soon as he arrived there. He told them that such behavior was not according to Scripture, neither was it honoring to God. Thankfully, the people listened to him, and things settled down again.

¹³ **destroyed...crucifixes** – This occurred during the German Peasants’ War, a widespread popular revolt in the German-speaking areas of Central Europe from 1522 to 1525. It failed because of the intense opposition by the aristocracy, who slaughtered up to 100,000 of the 300,000 poorly armed peasants and farmers. The war consisted of a series of both economic and religious revolts in which peasants and farmers, often supported by Protestant clergy, took the lead. The revolt incorporated some principles and rhetoric from the emerging Protestant Reformation, through which the peasants sought freedom and influence.

God gives Luther a wife

The Roman Catholic Church taught that it was sinful for a priest to marry. When Luther began to study the Bible, he discovered that God had never made such a law. On June 13, 1525, Luther married Catherine von Bora. Two years earlier, Catherine (or Katie, as Luther fondly called her) and several other women had escaped from a convent. Luther and his wife loved each other very much, and they were a good help to each other. The Lord blessed them with six children. One of the children, Magdalena, died on September 20, 1542, at the age of thirteen. Luther and his family were very sad, but they also rejoiced, knowing that this child was taken to heaven to be with her Savior forever.



Luther loved children and wrote a catechism for them, as well as many songs. Some of them are still sung today. Do you know the songs “Away in a Manger” and “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”? Luther wrote these songs, as well as more than 125 hymns. In 1524, he published the first German hymnbook. It contained only eight hymns, but each time it was printed more hymns were added. The German people loved to sing these hymns with their families or as they went about their daily activities.

Luther and Zwingli on the Lord’s Supper

In 1529, Philip of Hesse, one of the Protestant princes of Germany, arranged for a meeting with the leading theologians of Switzerland and Germany. He wanted them to reach an agreement about the doctrines of the Lord’s Supper. This meeting was held in Marburg. Luther and Philip Melanchthon,¹⁴ who was Luther’s greatest helper and an able theologian, represented Luther’s teaching that although the bread and wine do not literally change into the body and blood of the Lord Jesus, He is still physically present in, with, and under the bread. Ulrich Zwingli,¹⁵ the leading Reformer in Switzerland, who took his friend Johannes Œcolampadius,¹⁶ supported the belief that the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is only a memorial to the death of the Lord Jesus. Sad to say, each side was unwilling to compromise. When they parted

¹⁴ **Philip Melanchthon** (1457-1560) – German Reformer, theologian, close friend of Martin Luther, and author of *Loci Communes*, the first systematic treatment of Luther’s evangelical theology.

¹⁵ **Ulrich Zwingli** (1484-1531) – leader of the Protestant Reformation in northern Switzerland. He attended the universities of Vienna and Basel, and served as a pastor in Einsiedeln, where he was influenced by the writings of Erasmus. He pastored the Grossmunster Church in Zurich and died fighting a battle with those loyal to the Roman Catholic Church.

¹⁶ **Œcolampadius** (1482-1531) (*Latin*: “burning lamp”) – Born in Hussgen, Germany, he left the monastery after reading Luther’s writings and went to Basel, where he preached and wrote about the truths of Scripture. He agreed with Zwingli’s view of the Lord’s Supper. In 1518, he helped Erasmus in editing his Greek New Testament.

ways, Luther refused to shake Zwingli's hand as a brother in Christ. Zwingli was grieved over this. Sometimes God's people have differences of opinion and differences in their beliefs, and often hard feelings result. This is not what God teaches. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:10, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

His work and hospitality

In 1537, and again in 1541, Luther became so ill that his family and friends feared he would die. The Lord restored him to health, however, and enabled him to continue in his work. He lectured, preached, attended conferences, and wrote books and tracts. He and his wife Katie were well known for their hospitality. Even though they themselves often had little money, they welcomed anyone in need. Meals were usually times of lively conversation, as visitors talked with Luther about Scripture and its doctrines.

His death

Early in 1546, Luther wrote to a friend that he felt "old, spent, worn, weary, and cold, and had but one eye to see with." Feeling this way, he left for Eisleben to try to help some people settle a dispute over land, despite the cold winter weather. On his journey he became sicker and lay suffering in his hometown for several days. His beloved Katie was far away. Only his sons Martin and Paul had accompanied him on his trip. He did have friends surrounding him, however, in his last days. One of his friends, Justus Jonas, asked Luther, "Reverend Father, will you stand by Christ and the doctrine you have preached?" The dying Reformer roused himself to firmly answer "yes." His last words were, "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." He died on February 18, 1546. His body was taken to Wittenberg and buried in the churchyard. This was the same church where Luther had posted his famous ninety-five theses for all to read.

Luther was sixty-three years old when he died. He faced many trials and difficulties in his life; many times his enemies had tried to condemn him to death and silence him, but God enabled Luther to continue the blessed work of the Reformation. Many times he was sad and discouraged. The devil tried to make him fall and give up, but the Lord always helped Luther in his work so that he persevered until the end.

Throughout his life, Luther maintained a very heavy workload: teaching, writing books, organizing the new Protestant church, and providing overall leadership for the German Reformation. Luther never viewed himself as the founder of a new church body, however. In 1522, when his followers first began to use his name to identify themselves, he was not pleased. He wrote: "Let us abolish all party names and call ourselves Christians after Him Whose teaching we hold...I hold, together

with the universal church,¹⁷ the one universal teaching of Christ, Who is our only master.” His goal was to reform and restore the church so that it would be true to the biblical teaching of salvation by gracious faith alone. Little could he realize the impact he would have on Protestantism around the world, and that more biographies—well over one thousand by now—would be written about his life than any other person in history except the Lord Jesus.



¹⁷ **universal church** – the spiritual Church universal, which includes all true believers throughout the world and throughout all of time, as differentiated from the visible churches, local assemblies of professing Christians.