

Martin Luther

The Great Reformer



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Introduction

Great heroes are inspiring examples that help spur us on to noble endeavor. While we do not want to follow men so blindly that we lose sight of the Christ of God, yet there is room for conforming to the injunction of the great apostle, who says, "Follow me as I follow Christ."

Luther followed Christ. He was not humanly perfect by any means—who of us is? But, he did the right as God gave him to see the right, and it mattered not whether it was prince or pauper who tried to divert him from his path of duty. He kept right on battling for the truth. His own indomitable character is reflected in that hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.

This biography presents the leading aspects of the life of Luther and the *Appendix* contains a choice example of one of Luther's writings. We trust this material will inspire our noble young people to follow Luther as he followed Christ. To this task it is committed.

Michael J. McHugh
Arlington Heights, Illinois
2003

Chapter 1

A Poor Boy

On November 10, 1483, when Hans and Margaret Luther laid glad eyes upon the face of their newborn son, they little thought or even dreamed that they were looking into the face of one who would not only change the destinies of nations, but who would change the aspect of human history for all time to come. It is said that every child is an unlocked chest of possibilities. On this memorable date of November 10, 1483, God presented these humble German peasant parents with a gifted soul that had a God-ordained destiny, the extent and value of which will not be known fully until all human achievements will be brought to account.

When a boy who has poverty for his companion is inclined to find fault with the company that he is forced to keep, he should comfort himself by reading about the boyhood days of Martin Luther—a son of poverty who by the strength of God and the grace of Christ, stamped his name on every page of history written subsequently to his day. Martin Luther did not inherit from his parents luxuries that money can buy, but he did inherit those sterling qualities of character

that came into such good play when he was brought face to face with those battles that proved him a great victor. He inherited sturdiness of character, strong will-power, steadfastness of purpose, honesty of heart, and a religious disposition. He who falls heir to such should consider himself blessed of God and happy.

The Luthers were Germans. They lived in the Thuringian Mountains. If you will look at a map of Germany, you will find that these mountains are located near the central part of that country. Nestled among these steep and beautiful mountains is the little town of Eisleben. In it Martin Luther was born and here he died. The very next day after Martin was born, he was taken to the church and there baptized, for his parents were very religious people and they had been taught by their church that it was their duty as parents to have their children baptized as soon as possible.

Martin Luther was still a small baby when his parents moved from Eisleben to Mansfeld, where his father found work in the mines. The struggle to provide a living here for their loved ones was hard for Martin's parents. When he grew to be a man, he had this to say concerning those struggles: "My father was a poor miner and my mother carried the wood from the forests on her back; they both worked their flesh off their bones in order to bring up their children." And "bring" them up they did. Martin, his brother, and his three sisters were not permitted just to "grow up" and do as they pleased. The parents taught their children religion—in those days it was quite generally believed that religion could be most efficiently taught with the rod. Those were the days before the great religious Reformation, in which Luther was to have so large a part, had

swept over the world. The then prevailing religion of Roman Catholicism was largely a religion based upon human traditions.

Luther's parents were devout Catholics and their strenuous and even unmerciful discipline of their children, they believed, was the very best for the children's welfare. Because Martin stole a nut one time, his mother whipped him until the blood flowed. His father punished him so severely, at another time, that Martin could stand it no longer and fled from home. However, when Luther had grown to be a man, he did not harbor any bitterness in his heart against his parents. He remembered their awful grind of self-sacrificing toil and knew that they had toiled because they desired to give them proper food, clothing, and education. In speaking of the severe punishments which he received from the hands of his parents, he remarked. "They meant it well from the depths of their hearts, but they did not know how to distinguish the dispositions to which punishment is to be adapted." In later life—when God had given him greater light regarding Biblical truth and when, through Him, this light had been shed over all Europe and even over all the world—he saw that the severity of his parents had only reflected the un-Biblical extremes that had pervaded their generation.

As I have said, Luther was taught religion in his boyhood home at Mansfeld; but such a religion as it was! It was a religion without balanced Biblical truth, and such religion is always bondage most grievous. His mother gathered the children around her knees and told them of the Father and Christ. But what sort of ideas of God and Christ did Luther get in those hours of early piety? Hear what he says in later life about it:

“From early childhood I was accustomed to turn pale and tremble whenever I heard the name of Christ mentioned, for I was taught to look upon him as a stern and wrathful judge. We were taught that we ourselves had to atone for our sins, and since we could not make sufficient amends or do acceptable works, our teachers directed us to the saints in heaven, and made us to call upon Mary the mother of Christ and implore her to avert from us Christ’s wrath, and make him inclined to be merciful to us.” The Luthers, in accordance with the times in which they lived, believed in all sorts of supernatural influences. Luther says that in his childhood he had constant dread of witches and demons, which he believed always haunted his pathway or hid in dark corners to seize upon him as he passed. The Thuringian Forest, which surrounded the town, was supposed to be

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The Roman Catholic Mass

teeming with evil spirits, and beneath the ground, in the mines where Luther's father worked, was a possible dwelling place of the devil himself. Superstitious fears thus fastened themselves upon his mind, and he had no liberty until he found it in a saner conception of the boundless love and limitless power of Christ. Such was the religious atmosphere which young Luther breathed. Such were the gruesome thoughts that haunted him by night and taunted him by day. Is it any wonder that a merciful God poured the light of Truth into his soul, and that the light which could dispel the darkness of that soul could also lighten the path of millions of others who sat in darkness?

Chapter 2

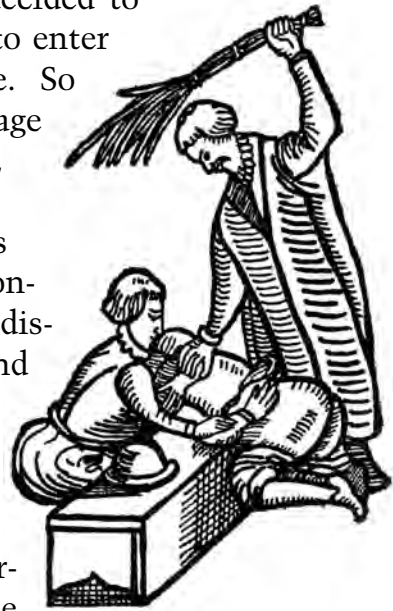
School Days

Martin's father longed to give his children better educational advantages than he himself had enjoyed. As Martin was the eldest son, they were especially desirous that he be well trained. Of course, strictly speaking, Martin's training began in the home at his mother's knee, but while he was still of a tender age, his ambitious parents started him in the village school. It seems that Luther attended this school more or less regularly until he was thirteen years of age. When Luther met with severity in his home from the hand of his parents, that severity was mellowed with an honest love. But when the timid, barefoot boy stepped over the threshold of the village school he found himself in different hands. Here he met severity without love. Doubtless Luther had some good teachers in school, but frequently, he suffered at the hands of those who were brutal and ignorant. He received fifteen whippings at school during one morning. This was not because he was so wicked, but because his teacher was ignorant. The lower schools throughout Germany at that time

were hardly worthy of the name “school,” and Luther compared them to “hell and purgatory.”

The young Martin Luther did not appreciate such a school, but he was not allowed to quit, for his parents had an honest ambition that he should be educated to become a lawyer. In this direction they bent every effort, but they were greatly disappointed, as we shall see later, when Luther decided to leave all worldly occupations to enter upon a strictly religious life. So

Luther went on to the village school, studied his Latin, received his whippings, and hated his teachers until he was thirteen years of age. It is a wonder that he did not become disgusted with teachers, books, and beating-rods and then run away from home and become an outlaw. Think what it would have meant to the world if he had done so. But perhaps, in these trying days, he



read the life of some great man as you are doing, and his soul must have been set ablaze with an ambition to become educated and good, so that he might be able to accomplish something of worth in the world. Therefore, he continued his studies. It is easy to imagine that young Luther had two burning ambitions—one to become wise and the other to become good—because he later became both, and he could hardly have become so without such ambitions. If a young man would find the greatest blessing in the world, let him go in search

of righteousness; if he would find the next greatest blessing in the world, let his search be for knowledge. Luther sought and found them both. If a young man would shun the greatest curse in the world, let him shun sin; if he would shun the next greatest curse in the world, let him shun ignorance. As a young man, Luther worked hard to shun both.

When the schoolmasters at Mansfeld were through pounding Latin into Luther with a stick, he was ready for a well-earned promotion. So about the time that Columbus was getting ready to make his third trip to America, Luther was getting ready to make his first trip to school away from home. This trip of Luther's took him to Magdeburg, a town located on the Elbe River about forty miles from his home. He was accompanied to Magdeburg by another lad from Mansfeld. Little is known as to what subjects the reformer-to-be studied while at Magdeburg, but more is known as to how he paid his expenses. The school that Luther attended at Magdeburg was a religious school managed by pious persons who exacted no tuition of Luther, because of his poverty. Young Luther, though freed from tuition expense, was confronted with the problem of meeting his personal expenses by starting with an empty purse. However, when a young man is determined to have an education he generally gets it even though he has to conquer poverty to do so. Though poor in purse, Luther was rich in natural gifts. He had a good pair of legs to carry him from house to house and a strong voice to sing when he arrived. It was common, during his stay in Magdeburg, to see him with a group of fellow students as poor as himself, standing at the front gate of a wealthy citizen. Sometimes they were invited to come

in, sit at the table, and eat with those to whom they sang. Sometimes with eager hands, they received “handouts” at the door. The young student of the present day, who has to do janitorial work or wash dishes in order to pay his school expenses, should extract comfort from the fact that he is following in the footprints of one of the world’s greatest figures—only he uses his hands; whereas, Luther used his lungs.

During his stay in Magdeburg, Luther was profoundly impressed with the strict piety that prevailed in connection with school-life there. Thirty-five years after he had attended this school he wrote:

When, in my fourteenth year, I went to school at Magdeburg, I saw with my own eyes a prince of Anhalt ... who went in a friar’s cowl[†] on the highway to beg bread, and carried a sack, like a donkey, so heavy that he bent under it, but his companion walked by him without a burden; this prince alone might serve as an example of the grisly, shorn holiness of the world. They had so stunned him that he did all the works of the cloister like any other brother, and he had so fasted, watched, and mortified his flesh, that he looked like a death’s head, mere skin and bones; indeed he soon after died, for he could not long bear such a sever life. In short, whoever looked at him had to gasp for pity and must needs be ashamed of his own worldly position.”

Luther had seen the prince he here describes in the days when his boyish mind was filled with the philosophy of the ascetic. In those days, he had been taught and led to believe that the favor of God was secured by physical self-abasement. To behold such an example would naturally impress him with the thought that this prince had a high degree of righteousness.

† A *cowl* is a long-hooded garment worn by a monk.

When Luther had sung in the streets and studied in the school at Magdeburg for scarcely one year, his stay in that city came to an end. Eisenach was a city twenty-five miles farther from Luther's home than was Magdeburg. In that city was a school known as the School of St. George. This was the native town of Martin's mother, and she had a relative living there, named Hutter. Perhaps Mrs. Luther had hopes that her son, Martin, could live with this relative and thus, avoid the necessity of begging his way as he was forced to do in Magdeburg. In this she was mistaken, for Martin had no sooner landed in the city than the clear notes of his song were lifted on the breeze of the morning; and there he begged bread for his body while in search of "bread" for his mind. Doubtless he became very much downcast at times. He may even have been tempted to return home to Mansfeld to go into the dark mines and there spend his life toiling beside his father; yet that would have been a long and dreary song that had no ending. One day, however, Martin's singing did come to a happy termination.

In the city of Eisenach lived a woman of beautiful character—Ursula Cotta. She had often seen the poor Luther boy in the streets and had heard the clear note of his song. She had eyes that saw and a heart that pities. She saw in the neglected boy qualities of great worth and she pitied him in his poverty. She and her husband, Conrad, invited the poor lad to come into their beautiful home and share its comforts. This event was the dawning of a new and bright day in Luther's life. It was the first time in all his career, that he had felt the soft touch of refined sympathy. He spent about four years in this stately old house, which is still stand-

ing and visited annually by thousands of people who know of the great work of the Reformer and who bless the memory of the woman who helped him in his hour of deep need.

Luther's stay in the city of Eisenach was indeed a happy one. He referred to the city in later life as "that dear city." He entered heart and soul into his studies in the school of St. George. He stored his mind with rich gems of thought and drank deeply of the spirit of piety possessed by his teachers. In this school, Martin came into contact with the great currents of thought that were being poured forth by the intellectuals as a result of their researches into old and neglected libraries and museums.

At the close of his four years' happy residence in the Cotta home, Luther made preparation to enter the famous university of Erfurt, about twenty miles east of Eisenach. By this time his father at Mansfeld, by reason of hard labor and simple honesty, had brought himself to a place of comparative financial and social comfort. He had been placed in one of the highest offices of the village. He was still ambitious for the educational success of his son and gave him all possible assistance in entering the great university. About May of 1501, Luther enrolled as a student at Erfurt. It seems that he remained at this center of learning for about four years, during which time he threw himself ambitiously into a study of the curriculum provided by the university. Not a great deal is known of the life of the future reformer during his university days. He lived a life of strict morality and suffered somewhat from depression and some illness. In 1502, he took the degree of bachelor of arts and three years later that of master of arts.

After Luther had left the lower school in Mansfeld, he spent about nine years in training before he entered upon what he at that time supposed to be his life's work—that of a monk. He was able to use the information gained in these years of schooling later in life, when he was called upon to combat the works and workers of unrighteousness in high places.