

## CHAPTER 4

# MARTIN LUTHER — A MAN USED OF GOD

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### LUTHER'S VISIT TO ROME

Martin Luther was a priest and a true son of the Papal Church, and had no thought that he would ever be anything else. But in the providence of God he was led to visit Rome. He pursued his journey on foot, lodging at monasteries on the way. At a convent in Italy he was filled with wonder at the wealth, magnificence, and luxury that he witnessed. Endowed with a princely revenue, the monks lived in splendid apartments, attired themselves in the richest and most costly robes, and feasted at sumptuous tables. With painful misgivings, Luther contrasted this scene with the self-denial and hardship of his own life; his mind was becoming perplexed.

When at last Luther beheld in the distance the 'seven-hilled city', he prostrated himself upon the earth, exclaiming, "Holy Rome, I salute thee!" He entered the city, visited the churches, listened to the marvelous tales repeated by priests and monks, and performed all the ceremonies required. Everywhere he looked upon scenes that filled him with astonishment and revulsion. He saw that iniquity existed among all classes of the clergy. He heard indecent jokes from prelates, and was filled with horror at their awful profanity, even during Mass. "No one can image," he wrote, "what sins and infamous actions are committed in Rome; they must be seen and heard to be believed. Thus they are in the habit of saying, 'If there is a hell, Rome is built over it: it is an abyss whence issues every kind of sin'".

By a recent decree, an indulgence had been promised by

the pope to all who should ascend upon their knees "Pilate's staircase", said to have been descended by Christ on leaving the Roman judgment hall, and to have been miraculously conveyed from Jerusalem to Rome. One day Luther was devoutly climbing these steps, when suddenly a voice like thunder seemed to say to him, "The just shall live by faith". (Romans 1:17) He sprang to his feet, and hastened from the place, in shame and dismay. That text never lost its power upon his soul. From that time he saw more clearly than ever before the fallacy of trusting to human works for salvation, and the necessity of constant faith in the merits of Christ. His eyes had been opened, and were never again to be closed, to the delusions of the papacy. When Luther turned his face from Rome, he turned away also in heart, and from that time the separation grew wider, until he severed all connection with the papal church.

After Luther returned from Rome, he received the degree of doctor of divinity at the University of Wittenberg. He took a solemn vow to study carefully and to preach with fidelity the word of God, not the sayings and doctrines of the popes, all the days of his life. He was no longer the mere monk or professor, but the authorized herald of the Bible. He firmly declared that Christians should receive no other doctrines than those which rest on the authority of Scripture. These words struck at the very foundation of papal supremacy. They contained the vital principle of the Reformation.

At Wittenberg a light was kindled whose rays would extend to the uttermost parts of the earth, and which was to increase in brightness for centuries to come. But light and darkness cannot harmonize. Between truth and error there is an irrepressible conflict. To uphold and defend the one, is to attack and overthrow the other. Said Luther, a few years after the opening of the Reformation, "God does not guide me, He pushes me forward. He carries me away. I am not master of myself. I desire to live in repose, but am thrown into the mist of tumults and revolutions". The battle of the Reformation was about to be joined.

The Roman Church made merchandise of the grace of God. Under the plea of raising funds for the erection of St. Peter's Church at Rome, indulgences for sin were publicly offered for

sale by authority of the pope. By the price of crime a temple was to be built for God's worship — the cornerstone laid with the wages of iniquity. It was this heresy that aroused Luther and led to the battle which shook the papal throne, and jostled the triple crown upon the pontiff's head.

The official appointed to conduct the sale of indulgences in Germany, Tetzel by name, had been convicted of the basest offenses against society and against the law of God; but having escaped the punishment due his crimes, he was employed to further the mercenary and unscrupulous projects of the pope. Tetzel repeated the most glaring falsehoods, and related marvelous tales to deceive an ignorant, credulous, and superstitious people. Had they possessed the Word of God, they would not have been so easily deceived. But for hundreds of years the circulation of the Bible was prohibited. People were forbidden to read it or have it in their houses. To swell the power and wealth of Rome's ambitious leaders, the Bible had been withheld from them.

As Tetzel would enter a town, a messenger went before him, announcing, "The grace of God and of the holy father is at your gates". His unholy traffic was set up in the church, where Tetzel, ascending the pulpit, extolled indulgences as the most precious gift of God. He declared that by virtue of his certificates of pardon, all the sins which the purchaser should afterward desire to commit would be forgiven him, and that "not even repentance is necessary". More than this, he assured his hearers that the indulgences had power to save not only the living but the dead; that the very moment the money should clink against the bottom of his chest, the soul in whose behalf it had been paid would escape from purgatory and make its way to heaven. No prelate dared lift his voice against this iniquitous traffic, but the minds of some were becoming disturbed and uneasy, and many eagerly inquired if God would not work through some instrumentality for the purification of the church.

Luther was angered by the blasphemous assumptions of the indulgence mongers. Many of his own congregation purchased certificates of pardon, and they soon came to their pastor, confessing their various sins, and expecting absolution, not because they were penitent and wished to reform, but on the ground of the indulgence. Luther refused them absolution,

and warned them that unless they should repent and reform their lives, they would perish in their sins. Perplexed, they returned to Tetzel complaining that their confessor refused his certificates. Some boldly demanded that their money be returned. Filled with rage, Tetzel uttered the most terrible curses, caused fires to be lighted in the public squares, and declared that he "had received an order from the pope to burn all heretics who presumed to oppose his most holy indulgences".

Luther's voice was heard from the pulpit in earnest, solemn warning. He set before the people the offensive character of sin, and taught them that it is impossible for man, by his own works, to lessen its guilt or evade its punishment. Nothing but repentance toward God and faith in Christ can save the sinner. The grace of Christ cannot be purchased; it is a free gift. He counseled the people not to buy the indulgences, but to look in faith to a crucified Redeemer. He related his own painful experience in vainly seeking by humiliation and penance to secure salvation, and assured his hearers that it was by looking away from himself and believing in Christ that he found peace with God.

### **NINETY-FIVE TIMES NO!**

Luther decided a more effectual protest was necessary against these abuses. The castle church of Wittenberg possessed many relics, which on certain holy days were exhibited to the people, and full remission of sins was granted to all who then visited the church and made confession. One of the most important of these occasions, the festival of "All-Saints", 1st November, was approaching. On the preceding day of Hallowed Eve, Luther, joining the crowds that were already making their way to the church, posted on its door a paper containing ninety-five propositions against the doctrine of indulgences. He declared his willingness to defend these theses the next day at the university, against all who should see fit to attack them.

These propositions attracted universal attention. They were read and re-read and repeated in every direction. Great excitement was created in the university and in the whole city. By these theses it was shown that the power to grant the pardon of sin, and to remit its penalty, had never been committed to the pope or to any other man. The whole scheme was a farce —

an artifice to extort money by playing upon the superstitions of the people. It was also clearly shown that the gospel of Christ is the most valuable treasure of the church, and that the grace of God is freely bestowed upon all who seek it by repentance and faith.

The questions Luther proposed had in a few days spread through all Germany, and in a few weeks they had sounded throughout Christendom. Many devoted Romanists, who had seen and lamented the terrible iniquity prevailing in the church, read the propositions with great joy. They felt that the Lord had graciously set His hand to arrest the rapidly swelling tide of corruption issuing from the seat of Rome. Princes and magistrates secretly rejoiced that a check was to be put upon the arrogant power which denied the right of appeal from its decisions.

Though Luther had been moved by the Spirit of God to begin his work, he was not to carry it forward without severe conflicts. The reproaches of his enemies, their misrepresentation of his purposes, and their unjust and malicious reflections upon his character and motives, came upon him like an overwhelming flood; and they were not without effect. The Reformer had bitter accusers to meet. Some charged him with acting hastily and from impulse. Others accused him of presumption, declaring that he was not directed of God, but was acting from pride and forwardness. "Who does not know", he responded, "that one can seldom advance a new idea without having some appearance of pride, and without being accused of exciting quarrels? Why were Christ and all the martyrs put to death? Because they appeared proud despisers of the wisdom of the times in which they lived, and because they brought forward new truths without having first consulted the oracles of the old opinions".

Many dignitaries, both church and state, were convicted of the truthfulness of his theses; but they soon saw that the acceptance of these truths would involve great changes. To enlighten and reform the people would virtually undermine the authority of Rome, and stop thousands of streams flowing into her treasury. Furthermore, to teach the people to think and act as responsible beings, looking to Christ alone for salvation, would overthrow the pontiff's throne, and eventually destroy

their own authority. For this reason they arrayed themselves against Christ and the truth by opposing the man of God sent to enlighten them.

Luther trembled inwardly — one man opposed to the mightiest powers of earth. He sometimes doubted whether he had indeed been led of God to set himself against the authority of the church. He wrote, "Who was I to oppose the majesty of the pope, before whom the kings of the earth and the whole world trembled? No one can know what my heart suffered during these first two years, and into what despondency, I may say into what despair, I was sunk".

### THE BIBLE AND THE BIBLE ONLY

When his enemies appealed to custom and tradition, or to the assertions and authority of the pope, Luther met them with the Bible, and the Bible only. He presented arguments which they could not answer; and the slaves of formalism and superstition clamored for his blood, as the Jews had clamored for the blood of Christ. "He is a heretic", cried the Roman zealots. "It is high treason against the church to allow so horrible a heretic to live one hour longer. Let the scaffold be instantly erected for him".

Soon he received a summons to appear at Rome to answer to the charge of heresy. The command filled his friends with terror. They knew full well the danger that threatened him in that corrupt city, already drunk with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. They protested against his going to Rome, and requested that he receive his examination in Germany.

This arrangement was finally effected, and the pope's legate was appointed to hear the case. In the instructions communicated by the pontiff to this official, it was stated that Luther had already been declared a heretic. The legate was therefore charged to "prosecute and reduce him to submission without delay". If he should remain steadfast, and the legate should fail to gain possession of his person, he was empowered to "proscribe him in every part of Germany; to banish, curse, and excommunicate all those who are attached to him". And further, the pope directed his legate, in order to root out entirely the pestilent heresy, to excommunicate all, of whatever dignity in church or state, except the emperor, who should neglect to

seize Luther and his adherents, and deliver them up to the vengeance of Rome.

Here was displayed the true spirit of popery. Not a trace of Christian principle, or even of common justice, was to be seen in the whole document. Before his case had even been investigated, he was summarily pronounced a heretic, and in the same day, exhorted, accused, judged, and condemned; and all this by the self-styled holy father, the only supreme, infallible authority in the church and state!

Augsburg had been fixed upon as the place of trial, and the Reformer set out on foot to perform the journey. Serious fears were entertained in his behalf. Threats had been made openly that he would be seized and murdered on the way, and his friends begged him not to venture. They entreated him to leave Wittenberg for a time, and find safety with friends who would gladly protect him. But Luther would not be dissuaded and continued his journey.

The news of his arrival at Augsburg gave great satisfaction to the papal legate. The troublesome heretic who was exciting the attention of the whole world now seemed in the power of Rome, and the legate determined that he would not escape. Luther's friends urged him not to appear before the legate without a safe-conduct, and they themselves undertook to procure it from the emperor. The legate intended to force Luther, if possible, to be conveyed to Rome, to share the fate of Huss and Jerome. Therefore through his agents he endeavored to induce Luther to appear without a safe-conduct, trusting himself to his mercy. But this the Reformer firmly declined to do. Not until he had received the document pledging him the emperor's protection, did he appear in the presence of the papal ambassador.

The Romanists had decided to attempt to win Luther by an appearance of gentleness. The legate, in his interviews with him, professed great friendliness; but he demanded that Luther submit implicitly to the authority of the church, and yield every point, without argument or question. He had not rightly estimated the character of the man with whom he had to deal. Luther, in reply, expressed his regard for the church, his desire for the truth, his readiness to answer all objections to what he had taught, and to submit his doctrines to the decision of certain

leading universities. But at the same time he protested against the cardinal's course in requiring him to retract without having proved him in error.

The only response was, "Recant, Recant". But the Reformer showed that his position was sustained by the Scriptures, and firmly declared that he could not renounce the truth. The legate, unable to reply to Luther's arguments, overwhelmed him with a storm of reproaches, jeers, and flattery, interspersed with quotations from tradition and the sayings of the Fathers, granting the Reformer no opportunity to speak. Seeing that the conference would be utterly futile, Luther finally obtained a reluctant permission to present his answer in writing.

At the next interview, he presented a clear, concise, and forcible exposition of his views, fully supported by many quotations from Scripture. After reading his paper aloud, he handed it to the cardinal, who cast it contemptuously aside, declaring it to be a mass of idle words and irrelevant quotations. Luther, fully roused, now met the haughty prelate on his own ground — the traditions and teachings of the church — and utterly overthrew his assumptions.

### I WILL EXCOMMUNICATE YOU

When the legate saw that Luther's reasoning was unanswerable, he lost all self-control, and in a rage cried out: "Retract, or I will send you to Rome, there to appear before the judges commissioned to take notice of your cause. I will excommunicate you and all your partisans, and all who shall at any time countenance you, and will cast them out of the church".

Luther promptly withdrew with his friends, declaring that no retraction was to be expected from him. This was not what the cardinal had purposed. He flattered himself that he could awe Luther to submission. Now, left alone with his supporters, he looked from one to another, in utter chagrin at the unexpected failure of his schemes.

Luther's efforts were not without good results. The large assembly present had opportunity to compare the two men, and to judge for themselves the spirit manifested by them, as well as the strength and truthfulness of their positions. How marked the contrast! The Reformer stood in the strength of God, having Scripture on his side; the pope's representative, self-



important, overbearing, haughty, and unreasonable, was without a single argument from the Scriptures, vehemently crying, "Retract, or be sent to Rome for punishment".

Even though Luther had secured a safe-conduct, the Romanists plotted to seize and imprison him. His friends urged that he return to Wittenburg without delay, and that the utmost caution be observed to conceal his intentions. He left Augsburg before daybreak, on horseback, accompanied by a guide furnished by the magistrate. Reaching a small gate in the wall of the city, it was opened to him and his guide, and they passed through without hindrance. Before the legate learned of Luther's departure, he was beyond the reach of his persecutors.

The legate was overwhelmed with surprise and anger at the news of Luther's escape. He had expected to receive great honor for his wisdom and firmness in dealing with this disturber of the church. He gave expression to his wrath in a letter to Frederick, the Elector of Saxony, bitterly denouncing Luther, and demanding that Frederick send the Reformer to Rome or banish him from Saxony.

In defense, Luther urged that the legate or the pope show him his errors from the Scriptures, and pledged himself in the most solemn manner to renounce his doctrines if they could be shown to contradict the Word of God. Luther's appeal to Scripture was consistent and steadfast. When later he should appear before the German emperor, Charles V, and the German Diet to answer for his faith, he boldly declared,

"Since your most serene majesty and your high mightinesses require from me a clear, simple, and precise answer, I will give you one, and it is this: I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or to the councils, because it is clear as the day that they have frequently erred and contradicted each other. Unless therefore I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by the clearest reasoning, unless I am persuaded by means of the passages I have quoted, and unless they thus render my conscience bound by the word of God, I cannot and I will not retract, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other; may God help me. Amen".

Frederick, the Elector of Saxony, had little knowledge of the reformed doctrines, but he was deeply impressed by the candor and clearness of Luther's words; and until the Reformer should be proved to be in error, Frederick resolved to stand as his protector. In reply to the legate's demand he wrote: "Since Dr. Martin has appeared before you at Augsburg, you should be satisfied. We did not expect that you would endeavor to make him retract without having convinced him of his errors. None of the learned men in our principality have informed me that Martin's doctrine is impious, antichristian, or heretical". The prince refused, moreover, to send Luther to Rome, or to expel him from his states.

In an appeal for the Reformation of the Catholic Church, Luther wrote to the emperor and nobility of Germany concerning the pope:

"It is a horrible thing to behold the man who styles himself Christ's vicegerent, displaying a magnificence that no emperor can equal. Is this being like the poor Jesus, or the humble Peter? He is, say they, the lord of the world! But Christ, whose vicar he boasts of being, said, 'My kingdom is not of this world'. Can the dominions of a vicar extend beyond those of his superior?"

This appeal was rapidly circulated throughout Germany, and exerted a powerful influence upon the people. His opponents, burning with a desire for revenge, urged the pope to take decisive measures against him. It was decreed that his doctrines should be immediately condemned. Sixty days were granted the Reformer and his adherents, after which, if they did not recant, they were all to be excommunicated.

That was a terrible crisis for the Reformation. For centuries Rome's sentence of excommunication struck terror to powerful monarchs; it filled mighty empires with woe and desolation. Those upon whom its condemnation fell, were universally regarded with dread and horror; they were cut off from communion and treated as outlaws, to be hunted like animals, to be exterminated. Luther was not blind to the tempest about to burst upon him. He wrote: "What is about to happen I know not, nor do I care to know. Let the blow light where it may, I am without fear. Not so much as a leaf falls, without the will of our

Father. How much rather will He care for us! It is a light thing to die for the Word, since the Word which was made flesh hath Himself died. If we die with Him, we shall live with Him; and passing through that which He has passed through before us, we shall be where He is and dwell with Him forever."

When the papal bull reached Luther, he declared:

"I despise and attack it, as impious, false. It is Christ Himself who is condemned therein. I rejoice in having to bear such ills for the best of causes. Already I feel at last I know that the pope is antichrist, and that his throne is that of Satan himself."

### FINAL SEPARATION

Then in a crowd of students, doctors, and citizens of all ranks, Luther burned the pope's bull, the canon laws, the decretals, and certain writings sustaining the papal power. "My enemies have been able, by burning my books," he said, "to injure the cause of truth in the minds of the common people, and destroy their souls; for this reason I consumed their books in return. A serious struggle has just begun. Hitherto I have been only playing with the pope. I began this work in God's name; it will be ended without me, and by His might."

It was not without a terrible struggle that Luther decided upon a final separation from the church. It was about this time that he wrote: "I feel more and more every day how difficult it is to lay aside the scruples which one has imbibed in childhood. Oh, how much pain it has caused me, though I had the Scriptures on my side, to justify it to myself that I should dare to make a stand alone against the pope, and hold him forth as antichrist! What have the tribulations of my heart not been! How many times have I not asked myself with bitterness that question which was so frequent on the lips of the papists: 'Art thou alone wise? Can every one else be mistaken? How will it be, if after all, it is thyself who art wrong, and who art involving in thy error so many souls, who will then be eternally damned?' It was so I fought with myself and with Satan, till Christ, by His own infallible Word, fortified my heart against these doubts."

The pope threatened Luther with excommunication if he did not recant; the threat was fulfilled. A new bull appeared,

declaring the Reformer's final separation from the Roman church, denouncing him as accursed of Heaven, and including in the same condemnation all who received his doctrines. So began the contest between Scripture and the traditions of men; between Protestant and Roman Catholicism, between the worship of the holy and loving God of creation, and the worship of a cruel and spurious impostor.

Do you grasp, dear reader, the magnitude, the significance of this one man's agonizing struggles to come against such an overwhelming august power, where 'all' had been indoctrinated in a false religion, to stand completely alone, fearful of death by burning, trembling; yet compelled to be unmoved from the principles of truth, to be different: can you comprehend that? Who would be such a fool, so egotistical, to come against such great odds, just to be seen and heard? Or is it better explained, that Luther's strength came from a love for His God and His truth, which was to flow into the uttermost parts of the earth, caressing it, breaking the shackles of Rome. Luther and his fellow Reformers were not without faults, nor were all their doctrines free from error. But who can fall into a cesspool, and not retain some of the stench when taken out?

What value can be placed on the privileges the Reformation has brought to us today? To worship freely, without threat of torture and burned at the stake? Many wanting to excuse Romanism of its superstitions, oppressions, and barbarity during the Middle Ages, suggests it was just the conditions of the times; people were uneducated then, and plead that the influence of modern civilization has changed her sentiments. In reality, it's just the other way around. The noontime of the papacy, is the midnight of the world. If it were not for the Reformation based on the Holy Word of God, the "Beast" receiving his "deadly wound", the barbarity of the Dark Ages would certainly exist yet today.

Rome asserts that the "church never erred; nor will it, according to the Scriptures, ever err." The Roman Catholic Church will never relinquish her claim to 'infallibility'. It is this doctrine that breeds barbarity and oppression. All that she has done in her past persecutions of those who rejected her dogmas she holds to be right; and would she not repeat the same acts, should the opportunity be presented? Rome is patiently biding

her time. Let the restraints now imposed by secular governments be removed and Rome reinstated in her former power, and there would speedily be a revival of her tyranny and persecution. For the Scriptures teach that Rome's "deadly wound was healed", and we live on the very threshold of that prediction being fulfilled today.