

FACES OF THE REFORMATION

MARTIN LUTHER

Born: Nov. 10, 1483 | Eisleben, Germany

Died: Feb. 18, 1546 | Eisleben, Germany



LutheranReformation.org

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Author of the 95 Theses which sparked the Reformation

LUTHER WAS RAISED BY GOD-FEARING PARENTS who sacrificed to give their son an education. Planning to become a lawyer, Martin Luther entered the University of Erfurt. (His courses in grammar, logic and rhetoric provided the tools Luther later used to study and interpret Scripture.) Law was a profession that was not only respected but would also ensure his ability to care for his parents in their later years. One day Luther was caught in a violent thunderstorm. He prayed to St. Anne, promising to become a monk if his life was spared. This was not a promise he took lightly. Much to the disappointment of his father, Luther shed his worldly life to enter the Augustinian monastery.

It was here that Luther fasted and prayed, constantly seeking to live a perfect and holy life for God's approval. This attempt to live a holy life included visiting and revering holy relics. There were relics that were reputed to be a splinter from the cross, or a branch from the burning bush, the hair of this saint or a piece of cloth from that one. Even Luther's trip to Rome, a city filled with more relics than any other in Europe, could not put his soul at ease. He could never be good enough for this righteous God. Despair set in. Luther's vicar (or priest), Johann von Staupitz, brought him to Wittenberg where he could mentor Luther more closely.

Luther began an in-depth study of the Bible while teaching at the University of Wittenberg. He continued this study after finishing his doctorate, believing that the Bible was more important than the teachings of the Church Fathers. In 1514, while studying Paul's letter to the Romans in his tower room, he finally saw the pure Gospel. He realized that sinners are saved not through good works but by the gift of God through faith. This insight into the Gospel and the assurance of his salvation gave him the confidence to overcome the challenges he would soon face.

The challenges began in the form of a man named Johann Tetzel. Tetzel was sent to Wittenberg to sell indulgences. After penitents confessed their sins, a priest might assign works of satisfaction as part of absolving sins. At first, indulgences were granted to Crusaders willing to sacrifice all in defense of the Church. Those who could not go could support the effort financially and also receive an indulgence, or pardon from sin.

This was so lucrative that the practice was soon used to raise funds for churches and hospitals, even infrastructure. Frederick the Wise would display his relics on All Saints Day, Nov. 1. The faithful could pay homage to the relics, pay money to Frederick and everyone would be happy at the end of the day; sins forgiven, revenues up. The three parts to penance changed from contrition, confession and absolution to contrition, confession and contribution.

Luther's concern was that there would no longer be any sense of true contrition. If sinners could receive pardon from all sins, then they could spend the rest of their lives not worrying about the statuses of their souls. He must protect his flock from this dangerous practice.

On Oct. 31, 1517, Luther posted his 95 Theses on the Castle Church doors, seeking a scholarly debate on the sale of indulgences. Although he wrote them in Latin, they were surreptitiously translated into German and distributed throughout the land, sparking the events that began the Reformation.

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

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