



Martin Luther

1483 – 1546

In my opinion Isaac Watts is the finest English hymnwriter (although many would cast their vote for Charles Wesley), Thomas Cranmer the best liturgist, William Tyndale the most perceptive Bible translator, Hugh Latimer the finest preacher, and the Westminster Divines the ablest catechists. Imagine all of these gifted people gathered up into one individual. Luther! What it took a dozen Englishmen two hundred years to do Martin Luther did in twenty.

Born in Eisleben, Germany, in 1483, Luther quickly distinguished himself academically and appeared headed for a career in law. His family was shocked when he announced he was entering a monastery. As part of his preparation to become a monk he made a pilgrimage to Rome, walking all the way there and back! Returning to Germany he completed his studies for his doctoral degree and was hired as professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg.

Nevertheless he remained haunted by one matter for which his learning provided no help: how does a sinner get right with an all-holy God?

The abstract guessing-games of much medieval theology only increased his frustration. Luther sought the answer in the confessional. Time after time he confessed his sins until those hearing his confession grew weary. He was much too severe with himself, they thought—too much given to dwelling on minor matters, upsetting himself unnecessarily.

But, in fact, Luther was not just worrying about trivial matters. And he was certainly not neurotic. He simply knew that God is not to be trifled with, that sin is undeniable and judgment inescapable. It was the spiritual director of the monastery, John Staupitz, who finally shed some light on Luther's perplexity: "Look to the wounds of Christ," Staupitz advised again and again, "for there you will find a full and sufficient pardon."

And then it happened! While he was reading Paul's Epistle to the Romans, he stumbled on a text which rang with the profoundest truth, and which continues to echo in the hearts of God's people everywhere: "The just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17). Through his fine appreciation of Hebrew and Greek grammar, as well as his growing grasp of the gospel that Paul is describing, he caught the force of God's "justice" or "righteousness" (both English words translate the same Greek word).

God's righteousness, he discovered, is not courtroom-type justice which gives people exactly what they deserve (no comfort for troubled sinners here!). God's righteousness, rather, means that God justifies (puts in the right with himself) those who cling in faith to Christ crucified, the provision God has made for us through his sheer mercy. "The just shall live by faith," Luther realized, meant that when we abandon any pretense to self-justification before God on the grounds of self-righteousness, we become rightly related to God through simply trusting his provision for us and entrusting ourselves to him.

It was, and is, impossible to exaggerate the cruciality of this gospel-truth. It meant that as often as earnest people looked within themselves and stood aghast at the ravages of sin there, they also knew themselves pardoned in the provision God had made for them in the cross. To say the same thing differently: Since faith, for Paul, was keeping company with Jesus Christ, as often as sinful people wondered about their status before God they now realized that when God looked upon them he saw them included in that Son with whom he is ever well pleased. The relief was indescribable.

To know that the "just" (justified) live by faith, said Luther, is to be the freest person alive. In 1520 he wrote a delightful pamphlet, "On Christian Liberty." In it he maintained that Christians are gloriously freed from their self-preoccupations. Christians do not live in themselves—they live in Christ, through faith, and in their neighbours,

through love. Christians are taken out of themselves, directed toward their Lord and toward those whom their Lord has given them to serve. The result? Christians are free from anxious self-concern and free for a self-forgetful service of their fellow-sufferers.

From 1521 until his death in 1546 a reward was promised anyone who slew Luther. He remained undeterred. He was asked where he would be if the worst happened—that is, if he and everything he stood for were trampled and destroyed. His reply? “I shall be then where I am now: in the hands of God.”

