

A Mighty Fortress is our God: the Life of Martin Luther

Luther wrote much about prayer. He said once, “I take on a great thing when I pray.” Luther meant that. Prayer was a great thing in his life. A story has been told about Luther sitting at his table at mealtime, and Luther’s dog was also there. Luther’s dog was almost always there. The dog’s name was Topol. The kindest translation of that name would be “rascal.” As the dog was there, Dr. Luther was eating and Topol was very carefully watching him eat his meat, and the dog was hoping for a morsel from Luther’s hand. Luther said, “Ah, if I could only pray the way that dog looks at meat. All his thoughts are on that morsel. He thinks, wishes, and hopes about nothing else. But my heart fails because it cannot hold to prayer without wandering.” We have all had that experience, too. Like Luther, it is difficult for us to hold to prayer without wandering.

Luther wrote some wonderful treatises on prayer. One day he was in his barbershop and his barber, whose name was Peter Beskendorf, was talking the way barbers often do, while he shaved Dr. Luther and gave him a haircut. Peter said, “Dr. Luther, how do you pray? Tell me how to pray.” Luther probably gave an answer in the moment, but he also went home and wrote a 20-page treatise on prayer. It was called *A Simple Way to Pray for a Good Friend*. He sent that to his barber, and it remains a wonderful writing from Luther. Walter Trobisch summarizes that treatise from Luther in his book, *Martin Luther’s Quiet Time*.

Today we have a prayer from Luther. I will use the prayer that Luther himself prayed on the morning before the Diet of Worms. As Luther faced the great trial the next day—his life was at stake and everything depended on what he said and what happened there—these are the words that he prayed. We may not face anything like that in our lives, but we do face daily trials of one kind or another, and we can pray this prayer of Martin Luther as we study his life. Let us pray.

“My God, stand by me, against all the world’s wisdom and reason [...] Not mine but Yours is the cause [...] I would prefer to have peaceful days and to be out of this turmoil. But Yours, O Lord, is this cause; it is righteous and eternal. Stand by me, You true Eternal God! In no man do I trust [...] Stand by me, O God, in the name of Your dear Son Jesus Christ, who shall be my defense and shelter, yes, my mighty fortress, through the might and strength of your Holy Spirit. Amen.”

We know that Luther often suffered from depression. He had rather violent mood swings. Sometimes he was cast into times of great despondency. He called those times “the dark night of the soul.” One of the most serious periods of depression that Luther experienced came in the middle of 1527. That was 10 years after the 95 Theses. In late April Luther began to experience some physical problems. Perhaps because of high blood pressure or some other physical problem, he began to suffer bouts of dizziness and fainting. In July he felt so weak that he was sure he was going to die. Then in August the plague visited Wittenberg, and soon Luther was the only professor remaining in the town. He wrote to his friend, Philip Melancthon, “I despaired. I spent more than a week in death and in hell. My entire body was in pain, and I still tremble.” More than the physical illness, however, or the fear of disease or the weakness he experienced in his body, there was an additional factor in Luther’s depression. He added in that letter to Philip, “Completely abandoned by Christ, I labored under the vacillations and storms of desperation and blasphemy against God.” Not only did Luther experience physical illness, but he also experienced spiritual rebellion.

Luther suffered for some weeks in that condition, until, as he put it, “Finally through the prayers of the saints God began to have mercy on me and pulled my soul from the inferno below.” What Luther did

then was write a hymn. He wrote the best-known of his 37 hymns, *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott*, "A Mighty Fortress is our God." One historian has said, "That hymn is more than a piece of music; it is an event in European history." I will talk for some moments now about how that hymn is illustrative of Luther's own life while remembering that it is "an event in European history."

The hymn begins, "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; / Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing..." As Luther came out of his time of depression and rebellion, he remembered Psalm 46:1, which says, "God is our refuge and strength." Luther's hymn is his great commentary on that wonderful psalm. Remember Luther's prayer at Worms that we prayed a few moments ago, "Jesus Christ is my defense and shelter, yes, my mighty fortress." Then just after Luther faced the officials of the Holy Roman Empire at Worms, as he was making his way back to Wittenberg, he was kidnapped, though fortunately it was by friends and not enemies. He was kidnapped by the men of Frederick the Wise and taken to the Wartburg, where he spent 10 months before it was safe for him to go back to Wittenberg. At the Wartburg Luther lived in a great fortress. We are not sure whether the Wartburg was in his mind when he wrote the hymn, but it was certainly a picture of a mighty fortress and a bulwark, where Luther was safe for that time. Luther's safety, of course, in his own heart, mind, and soul was not in earthly princes or in great physical castles but in the Lord God Himself.

Luther had a refuge in the Lord, and he needed it because he was very conscious that he also had an enemy. He had a very powerful enemy. His hymn says, "For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe; / His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate, / On earth is not his equal." One of the most recent biographies of Luther, which is also one of the best, is entitled *Luther, Man between God and the Devil*. Luther's life was lived at that place, because he was very aware of the power, hatred, and enmity of the devil. By the power of God Luther was determined to defy the devil. When he was to go to Worms to make his defense before the emperor, his friends urged him not to go because they believed it was not safe for him to go. Luther believed that if he could go present the truth of the Gospel, then that is what he should do. He believed it was possible to make an impact on the people there. Luther said, "I will go there, though I shall find there as many devils as there are tiles on the housetops." Luther was determined to go and resist Satan and glorify God.

Luther's most famous clash with the devil was the time he threw an inkwell at the devil at the Wartburg. Some people question whether that really happened. I do not know if Luther actually picked up his inkwell and threw it at the devil. Yet as Luther was in that little room at the Wartburg for those 10 months he was translating the New Testament into German. He was composing powerful, moving German. He was releasing the Word of God so that people—maids, schoolchildren, farmers, miners, and all ordinary people—could read the Bible for the first time. Luther realized that he was in a spiritual conflict as he worked on translating the New Testament. He translated very quickly, and it was published in September of 1522. It was called *The September Testament*. Luther knew that there was spiritual conflict going on. Whether he actually threw the inkwell or not, he was aware that Satan was opposing him in every step he took. There is another way the story is told that the devil actually threw the inkwell at Luther. If that was the case, then Luther was merely throwing it back. Luther was a person who was very vigorous in his expressions and actions. It would have been consistent with his personality for him to think that the devil was truly opposing his work. Thus he might have picked up that inkwell and thrown it at the devil.

Luther knew that his strength was not in himself or anything he could do, but rather in God and His Word. His hymn says, "We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us." As Luther began to make his way theologically, he had to engage in a number of debates with Catholic opponents. In those debates Luther gradually moved from his belief in the authority of the pope, church

councils, and tradition, to the authority of Scripture alone—*sola Scriptura*—which is God’s truth. In the section of our textbook (*The Story of Christianity, volume 2*, by Justo Gonzalez) on Luther’s theology that has the heading “The Word of God,” I object to the neo-orthodox twist that Professor Gonzalez gives to his interpretation of Luther on inerrancy. Luther believed that the Bible was the Word of God. He believed in the doctrine of plenary verbal inerrancy of Scripture. Luther said, “Scripture is certainly God’s Word, as if God Himself were speaking.” There is no doubt that Luther held the highest and firmest view on the authority and inerrancy of Scripture.

The church condemned and excommunicated Luther. In 1521 he was summoned to appear before the Council of Worms. When Martin Luther was 38 years old, he faced the 21-year-old Charles V, who was the Holy Roman emperor and king of Spain and the Netherlands. Once the church had acted it was time for the state to act. It was in that dramatic setting that Luther made his most famous speech and defense of *sola Scriptura*. People had wanted a clear and simple answer from Luther. So Luther said, “Since your majesty and your high mightinesses desire a simple reply, I will answer.” Then he gave his answer, “Unless I am convinced by the evidence of Scripture or by plain reason—for I do not accept the authority of the pope or the councils alone, since it is established that they have often erred and contradicted themselves—I am bound by the Scriptures I have cited, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. God, help me. Amen.” Some accounts add the famous words, “Here I stand.” Luther may or may not have spoken those words, but the most popular biography of Martin Luther uses those words. It is called, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, by Roland Bainton.

Soon Protestant preachers throughout Germany and elsewhere were following Luther in his stand for the Scripture. One cartoon from Germany in the mid 1520s shows a Lutheran preacher saying, “This is what God says,” and it shows a Catholic preacher saying, “This is what the pope says.” The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* became a centerpiece in the Lutheran and Protestant Reformation.

Luther knew that God and God’s Word would triumph, and he celebrated that. He wrote, “We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us.” As an older man, near the end of his life, Luther preached a sermon in which he looked back on the course of the Reformation. He said, “All I have done is to put forth, preach, and write the Word of God. Apart from that I have done nothing. While I have been sleeping or drinking Wittenberg beer, it is the Word that has done great things. I have done nothing. The Word has done and achieved everything.” Most people catch that reference to beer, but the most important part is Luther’s statement that God had worked through him and that God’s Word had triumphed.

As Luther lived, worked, struggled, and preached, it was not easy. God called him to a difficult task, and Luther was willing to pay the price. In his great hymn he wrote, “Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; / The body they may kill...” One of the most amazing things about the story of Luther is that he was not killed. The human reason for that was the protection of Frederick. God used Frederick to protect Luther so that his enemies could not get to him. Luther knew that he might be killed. He had been excommunicated by the church. Later in that same year, 1521, he came under the ban of the empire, which meant that anybody could kill Luther and no questions would be asked. Yet Luther did not live in fear of being killed. Several years before the meeting at Worms, in 1518, Luther had a meeting with Cardinal Cajetan.

The cardinal was trying to put pressure on Luther to make him realize what a precarious situation he was in. The cardinal asked, “Do you suppose that Prince Frederick will take up arms for your sake?” Luther replied, “This is not at all what I desire.” Then the cardinal asked, “Where will you stay, then?” Luther

answered, "Under God's heaven." Luther was not concerned about those things because he knew that God would take care of him.

In 1521 Frederick did intervene and Luther was taken safely to the Wartburg. The artist Durer believed, as many people in Germany did, that Luther had been kidnapped and probably killed on his way back to Wittenberg. People did not know that he was safe at the Wartburg. Durer made the anguished cry, "Is he still alive? Or have they murdered him? I do not know. Oh God, if Luther is dead, who will henceforth proclaim the holy Gospel with such clarity? Oh God! What would he not have still been able to write for us in 10 or 20 more years?" It turned out that the church had him for another 25 years, and he certainly wrote prolifically.

Luther was quite willing to face danger, and he was not concerned about his possessions. He could write, "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; / The body they may kill." Kindred, however, was something special for Luther. He did not worry about his own physical safety or his possessions. Yet it was difficult for him to think about losing his kindred. We know much about his marriage to Katie. It is one of the great stories of church history. Luther and Katie represent in many ways a wonderful, warm Christian marriage that is also based on realism. As their children come, they are the picture of a Christian home. The Protestant pastor and his family was something new in the world. People had not seen that before.

I will not spend much time talking about Katherine von Bora, although I wish I could because she is so interesting. She was important for Luther and for the whole of the Reformation. Luther loved her. He liked to make some gentle fun of her sometimes. He called her "My lord Katie." Apparently she knew how she thought the house should run. Luther was not good at things like that. He said that in most things he let Katie tell him what to do, and in other things the Holy Spirit told him what to do. Luther also called her "My rib." When he was away from home and wrote her a letter it would often be addressed, "Dear rib." That was a reference to the creation of Eve in Genesis. The greatest tribute that Luther ever paid to his wife was to call the book of Galatians, which he loved more than life itself, "My Katie." That book of the Apostle Paul was Luther's love, and the way he referred to it was to call it "my Katie." Luther said that marriage is a "school of sanctification." So if you want to get sanctified, just get married. There are many interesting comments from Luther about how that worked out in his life. In living with Katie, he could see his own sins and his own shortcomings, as well as hers. They helped each other and nudged each other along toward greater faithfulness and love for God.

Luther had a wonderful family. He loved his children. He taught them and learned from them. There are many delightful stories about how Luther related to his children and how he learned from them. They were so trusting of him, yet he was not that trusting of his Heavenly Father. Every day he was learning spiritual lessons, not only from Katie, but also from Hans, Magdalena, and his other children. When his 13-year-old daughter, Magdalena, died in his arms, it so overwhelmed him that his faith failed. The historian Steven Osment wrote, "I know of no other occasion in Martin Luther's life in which his theology and faith were not a match for the enemies who threatened him. He defied the emperor and German princes and several popes. He cursed and taunted the devil. This theology truly failed him only at the death of a child." Luther struggled mightily when his child died. Through great sorrow he was finally able to say, "It is so strange to know that she is happy in heaven and yet for me to be so sad." Two years later it appeared that Margarethe would also die. Luther commented that should she die he would not be angry with God as he was the first time. It took a long time for Luther to come in trust and love to God again.

Luther wrote, “God’s truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever.” As I complete these thoughts about Luther’s life I will speak briefly about Luther’s mistakes. It is God’s truth that abides, and God’s kingdom that is forever. Luther realized, as he put it, that we are at the same time sinners and righteous—*simil iustus et peccator*. Luther said, “The Christian knows and feels three things about himself: we are always sinners, we are always repenting, and we are always forgiven.” There are certainly illustrations in Luther’s life of what I call mistakes. If Luther were here he would want me to take out that word “mistakes” and instead use the word “sins.” Luther called things by their real names.

There are at least four points that are often mentioned when people think of Luther’s shortcomings, mistakes, and sins. One is his role in the Peasants’ War. Some things Luther did in that war he did with good motives. Yet other things were at least tactical errors if not outright sin. Another point was his recommendation of secret bigamy for Philip of Hesse. In order to protect that Protestant prince, Luther said that he could take a second wife, but he should not tell anyone about it. It was not Luther at his finest hour. That was a failure in morality and integrity.

Luther’s attitude toward Jews was not commendable. One of his last writings was *On the Jews and their Lies*. Things can be said that help put Luther’s comments more in context and show that his anger was against the Jews for rejecting the Gospel. It was not outright racism. Nonetheless, Luther’s writings certainly indicate a failure in charity. Another shortcoming was Luther’s coarseness in language and conduct. He could use obscene language and vulgar expressions. Luther spoke like that not because he enjoyed such language, but rather because he was employing theological uses of vulgarity. Luther made good use of stories and language in order to attack the pope, the devil, and unfortunately other people as well. There is much in that conduct that we ought to recoil from, even as Zwingli did. He could not understand how Luther could be so coarse. Luther himself may have even wished at times that he could be more genteel in the way he expressed himself. Like us, Luther’s hope was not in himself and his goodness but in Christ and His righteousness. As he said, “Did we in our strength confide, our striving would be losing; / Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God’s own choosing: / Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He; / Lord Sabaoth, His name, from age to age the same, / And He must win the battle.”

Luther died on February 18, 1546. He had gone to the town where he was born to try to reconcile two brothers who were upset with each other. Even though Luther was ill, he made the long journey there. While he was there he became sick. One of his friends asked, “Reverend father, will you die steadfast in Christ and the doctrines you have preached?” Luther’s clear voice said, “Yes,” for the last time. Philip Melancthon was lecturing at the university when a student messenger burst in with the news of Luther’s death. Melancthon struggled for control, unable to speak, and finally his faltering voice told the students what had happened. He broke out in anguish with Elisha’s horrified cry as he saw the prophet Elijah ascending to heaven in the chariot of fire, “The charioteer of Israel has fallen.”

I will end this lesson the way I began it, talking about Luther and prayer. Philip, in his brief funeral oration for Luther, recalled finding Luther frequently on his knees, with tears running down his cheeks, praying for the universal church. Then Philip added these words, “Some have complained that Luther was more vehement than need required. I will not dispute against any, but I answer thus, that Erasmus has often said about Luther, ‘God has given this last age a sharp physician because of the great diseases of the same.’” Note that Philip quoted Erasmus, who was Luther’s great theological enemy.

It is almost impossible to lecture on Luther. More books have been written about Luther than about anybody else in history except Jesus Christ. When one begins to talk about Luther, there is so much to

say that it is almost impossible to know how to say it. That is why I concentrate on his hymn, “A Mighty Fortress,” and use it to illustrate various aspects from his life.

Let me give you some more information about the Peasants’ War and Luther’s role in it. During the time of Luther there was much unrest everywhere among the peasants, the poorest people of society. Part of the reason for that was that some of the rights and privileges of the peasants had gradually been eroded. For instance, historically, peasants were able to collect firewood from common ground, but as lords and nobles felt financial pressures themselves they restricted such rights of the peasants. So those poor people were pressed down even further. They began to revolt. One of Luther’s early writings was called *The Freedom of the Christian Man*. Luther was focusing on spiritual freedom, but people could interpret his writing in other ways. Luther became a hero to the peasants. When he talked about freedom, they understand him to mean freedom from earthly lords as well as freedom in spiritual ways. There were revolts, actions, and skirmishes in which peasants took up arms and fought. When that happened, Luther was horrified. One of his writings, which has been called his most unnecessary writing, was called *On the Murdering, Thieving Hordes of the Peasants*. It was addressed to the lords, and Luther told them to “slay, smite, and stab.” Luther feared anarchy above everything else. While he had some sympathy for the peasants, and early on he was viewed as a kind of communist hero, the later Luther was certainly not on the side of the peasants. In that writing he gave unnecessary encouragement to people who were going to respond rather violently anyway. Luther’s reputation among many people was marred because it seemed that he was taking the side of the oppressors against the oppressed. Luther’s real concern was that, while the peasants had some rights and ought to be treated fairly, the Gospel should not be mixed with those political concerns. The peasants should not march under the banner of the cross. Those social concerns should not be mixed up with the freedom of the Christian. While we may be able to see some reasons for what Luther did, I consider it at least a clear failure in tactics. He encouraged oppression and murder, whether he meant to or not, in saying things the way he did.

Let me also expand on what happened during the two years of Luther’s life that he struggled with Magdalena’s death. It was not an ineffective time for Luther. He continued to work and preach. It is evident that he was torn in his faith. There were doubts that crowded in upon him. Yet such struggles marked all of Luther’s life. Life was an up and down experience for Luther. He could be elated at one moment and then in the depths of despair in the next. His life could provide a psychiatrist or a psychologist with ample work to understand Luther. There are some books that attempt to psychoanalyze Luther, which is called psychohistory. There are occasional insights in those works, but they do not get to the heart of Luther. Luther’s depression was not mental illness. It was merely a tendency to experience highs and lows of emotion. Some people are like that, and some people are steadier. Calvin did not go nearly so high nor fall as low as Luther. He was more in the middle in his emotional life. Luther’s emotional ups and downs produce part of the appeal in Luther for us. People identify with Luther. They might like Calvin, but they tend to love Luther because he was so human, and there is so much about him that we see in ourselves.

Finally, let me point out that some of the biographies of Martin Luther, especially the one by Bainton, provide some more information about Katie. There are several books about Katie, but they do not achieve the quality that they should. If you want to know more about Katie, I suggest you read *Here I Stand*, by Roland Bainton. Bainton, professor of church history at Yale, not only wrote about Luther, but he also wrote about Erasmus and the women of the Reformation. He wrote several books about the women in Italy, France, and Germany who were involved in the Reformation. He was very concerned to emphasize the importance of people like Katie von Bora.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).