

Luther and Justification (Part 1)

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[0:00] Well, this evening we're going to look at history. I'm excited about it. What were the forces! that compelled an obscure monk living in the 16th century to literally put his life on the line in an attempt to recapture the Word of God from a Christ-denying religion.

The launch of the Reformation was not only deadly to the careers of many thousands of men, it was deadly to their very lives, which were forfeit both by sword and by the flames of execution and burning at the stake. The problem from Martin Luther's perspective was really quite simple. Nothing he heard or saw in the 16th century Roman Catholic Church could be identified with or associated with the Gospel of Christ. The Gospel had been lost in Luther's estimation.

And I want to be candid at this point. I attended a Catholic Mass last week, and nothing I saw or heard came close to a Gospel message. Nothing was Christ-honoring. They did pray to Mary to ask Jesus to save the deceased.

First, as I said in our last lesson, Luther considered the Reformation to be so significant that he was willing that the church be torn asunder if that became necessary. Now, why was Luther willing to risk that?

[2:11] For him, the salvation of souls was at stake. Men's souls hung in the balance. You may also remember that the battle cry of the Reformation became, After darkness, light. The world had been in a morass of darkness for about a thousand years.

Then the lights had gone out because of man-centered religion. And Luther believed the reforming of the church was the only means of escape. And this was no small matter. By raising up Luther, God himself intervened in human history. God brought light into a very dark and dying world. A pebble was thrown into the pond.

And the ripples started out in the early 1500s. And those ripples are still traveling to this day. We still feel the impact of Luther and others and what they did to recapture the gospel of Christ because the gospel had been hidden intentionally by the leadership of the Roman church at the cost of many souls, including their own. So in many respects, Luther stood against the whole world in an effort to recapture specifically the doctrine of justification by faith alone, in Christ alone, as revealed in Scripture alone.

And I said, last time, you are not saved by believing in the doctrine of justification. You are saved by believing in the finished work of Christ.

And of course, that encompasses his death on the cross, his shedding of his blood, his burial, his resurrection, his ascension into heaven, where he is at this moment seated in the heavenlies as our high priest to the right hand of the Father and interceding with the Father for his children on earth, the church, the true church.

[4:45] Luther was born around the year 1483. That alone is interesting from an historical perspective because no one knows for sure the exact date of his entrance into the world.

He died in 1546, meaning that he was only in his early 60s at his death. There are many of us in this room that are older than Luther ever reached in this life.

And he was quite an interesting figure. One historian has reported that Luther seemed to have a life crisis about every five years in his life.

He was born into a family that was better off than those around them. His earthly father owned several mines and had employees that worked for him.

Now, this man was not exorbitantly rich, but he was certainly comfortable and he was able to take care of his family. And because he was a man of means, he was able to send his son Martin to receive a superior education.

[6:01] Well, old dad had a dream that his young son Martin would become a lawyer. And he directed him that way.

Luther enrolled as soon as he could in a university, and they could do that at a young age in those days. And he studied law. And he quickly gained for himself, among the professors and others, a reputation for being a brilliant student.

And his future as a jurist excited his father to no end. Well, in 1505, he paid a visit to his parents. And while returning to the university, he was caught outside in a sudden, violent thunderstorm. A lightning bolt struck just a few feet from Luther. He went to the ground, and he was absolutely terrified. And lying on the ground and trembling with fear, he cried out, and this is what he said, Help me, Saint Anne.

[7:14] I will become a monk. That's what he said. Now, the Catholic Church, according to their traditions, Saint Anne, they said, they claimed, was the mother of Mary, and therefore the grandmother of Jesus.

And, of course, that tradition, I don't know if it has any foundation, in fact, or history. But Luther knew about her because she had been set aside by the Roman Church to be a saint over those that worked in the mining industry.

And, of course, that's a very dangerous, even to this day, that's a dangerous field of endeavor. And men in the mines would pray to Saint Anne when they were in the mines.

And, of course, when something happened down there, something bad. And Luther would have known through his dad, who owned the mines, about Saint Anne.

So Luther prayed. He cried out to Saint Anne and basically said, If I survive this lightning storm, and that was an issue in doubt, at the time it hit right next to him, God knows where to put those lightning bolts.

[8:35] He said he would become a monk. And he did survive. He got up off the ground. He went directly to his university dorm room, gathered up his personal belongings, told his classmates farewell, and walked directly down the road to an Augustinian monastery, and presented himself as a candidate for the priesthood.

He was serious. That lightning really shook him up. Now, we cannot understand the Reformation without an appreciation for this crisis that occurred in 1505, which drove Luther to become a monk. His father was furious. Oh, he was so mad. He was fit to be tied. He hated him going into the priesthood.

He knew that Luther would have a promising career as a lawyer. And besides, the country was overrun with Catholic priests.

And I made a note here to myself. I said, Don't tell that story, but I'm going to tell it anyway. When my dad was alive and working, the vice president of Phillips Puerto Rico Corps, their big chemical complex in Puerto Rico, he hired the first Puerto Rican boy to graduate from college as a chemical engineer.

[10:15] And I knew him well, Eduardo de Cristina Urbanas. His mother's maiden name was Urbanas. That's how they do it in the Spanish world. And he and I, actually, we went around the island. Dad gave him a week off with pay and gave him some money in a Phillips car, and he drove me all over.

We had a great time. It was neat. And I stayed in touch with him for a long time. And he walked into my dad's office one day. He said, Mr. Holland, he said, I'm going to be quitting the company.

And I said, Oh, my gosh, Eduardo, I can't believe that. What happened? He said, I'm going to become a Catholic priest. And my dad, who was not Catholic, said to him, Eduardo, Puerto Rico has all the Catholic priests they need.

They need chemical engineers. But he couldn't dissuade him. And he became a priest. And he was in Maryland the last I knew. And that was a century ago, I think. Luther entered the monastery. And he went through the various stages of ordination, which he achieved in 1507. This was a critical period in his life.

[11:23] There is something quite poignant about the place of Luther's location of ordination. It occurred in Erfurt, the capital and largest city in the state of Thuringia in central Germany.

A century earlier, a man by the name of John Hus arose as a Czech theologian and philosopher. And he became a church reformer. There were reformers before Luther. And Hus was one of the principal ones. In the language of the Czech people, Hus means goose.

And that's really important for our lesson. Hus believed with all his heart, as did Wycliffe, I might add, but Hus believed that people should have a copy of the Bible in their own language placed in their hands.

You know what the Catholic church had done with the Bible? Chained it to the altar. And I've read where even the priests couldn't read it, that it was bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the Pope. [12:42] But it was chained to the altar. And that really upset Hus. Well, when he said, we need to put a copy in the hands of every person on earth in their own language, the Catholic bishop condemned Hus to death.

That was a big deal. As the sentence was being carried out, Hus had this to say. Very famous. You may cook this goose today, because that's what his name meant, but there will come after me a swan whom you will not be able to silence.

And Lutheran churches, the symbol of Lutheran churches is a swan. Luther was called the swan. When Hus said this, the Catholic bishop who had condemned him heard it, and he said, over my dead body will a swan arise and, you know, won't be silenced.

Over my dead body. Well, the bishop died a few years later. He was buried under the altar of that Catholic church there. And 100 years later, Luther was ordained at that very altar.

So he was ordained standing over the dead body of the bishop who had said, over my dead body. When he condemned Hus to death by burning at the stake.

[14:21] So the swan did stand over his dead body. And Luther has long been considered the swan that Hus spoke of. In fact, there are symbols even in America of the swan connected to the Lutheran church.

Luther went into the monastery, but they turned out to be years of great stress and anxiety for him. Now, the record indicates he made a superb monk.

And he was well behaved. The early records say carried out his duties assigned to him, which was principally mopping and dusting and cleaning and things like that. But a hard rule for life in a monastery was that each monk was to appear daily before their father confessor and reveal to him the sins of the past day.

Of course, we know that the Catholic church has confession and you go in and bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I've gone to the priest's office many times and said, bless me, Father, I have sinned. Then I closed the door.

So the priest would line up and recite the sins of the past day. And each monk took less than five minutes to confess and then they would receive absolution.

[15:50] You know, the priest would say, what is this sin, my son? And they'd say, well, I did whatever. And I can only imagine what those confessions consisted of. You know, last night I coveted Brother Ralph's mashed potatoes. at supper.

And early this morning I snuck a candle in my room and hid it under my blanket and read a scroll. I mean, how much trouble are you going to get into as a monk in a German monastery on a mountaintop in Germany in 1507?

You can get all kinds of trouble today because of the failures of the Catholic priesthood in the area of sexual predators. But I hope that was not true in this little monastery in Germany in the 16th century.

So after reciting the previous day's sins in five minutes or less, the priest would return to their duties of dusting or sweeping or mopping the floors. And then Luther would come and he would enter the confessional to the groans of the priest that had the confession that day.

At first, he started off and he would confess the previous day's sins for 20 minutes. The next day, he went for 30 minutes.

[17:05] And it was just a matter of a few days he was confessing for one hour. Now remember, this is the previous day's sins inside this mountaintop monastery in Germany.

They had no contact with the outside world. They didn't log on the internet on inappropriate websites. That was not a problem. Well, Luther didn't stop there.

Within a few weeks, he would go in and confess the previous day's sins for two hours. And then he increased it to five hours.

And then he increased it to eight hours. And then one day, he went in and he confessed the previous day's sins and transgressions for 15 hours.

and the fathers were incensed. They thought, we're going to have to work in shifts to hear Luther's confession.

[18:05] You go two hours, then I'll go two hours. And all these were the previous day's violations. And there was more than one occasion when Luther would head back to his room and on the way he would remember one sin.

He forgot to confess. He would lose all peace that he had received when the father confessor had absolved him of the sins and transgressions of the law of God and he would return to the confessional, approach the priest and explain that he had to return and he would like to start over and do them all from the top.

Well, the priests got together and they met and they thought Luther's trying to get out of work. He doesn't want to mop, he doesn't want to sweep. And many historians and theologians came to the conclusion that these actions were evident that Luther was insane.

They really thought he was insane. he took a guilt complex to a whole new level. Now, there is no doubt that he was haunted by his guilt before a holy God.

And there is no doubt that he saw no way to rid himself of that guilt. Try as he might, he could not get rid of the guilt.

[19:49] Now, remember too, and it helps to know this, he had the mind of a lawyer. He would study with great scrutiny, now not man's law, God's law.

He would pour over God's law. and then he would measure himself against God's law. And most people would look at the greatest commandment to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and conclude, well, no one's ever done that for one second.

I'm not going to worry about it. I mean, I think most people would conclude that. Not Luther. he would say, if that is the greatest commandment, and it is, and he knew that, then a violation of that commandment is the greatest sin.

And I'm going around 24 hours a day committing the greatest sin that can be committed, and I don't know any way out of this.

And history records that Luther got to the point where he would return to his room and physically beat himself over his inability to live up to the law of God.

[21:13] He was into self-flagellation. And he would also enter into extreme fasting where he wouldn't eat for days and days looking for a peace that would not come.

Wouldn't come. no one has ever lived and fulfilled the great commandment for one second when the standard is all.

All your heart, soul, mind, and strength. If that's the standard, none of us ever lived up to it. People never seemed to give this failure a second thought, but it was killing Luther, literally killing him.

his chief father confessor got so frustrated with him that one day he said this, Martin, if you're going to come in here to the confession, and you're going to come in here and you're going to spend hours in the confessional, bring us something that is serious.

all you're bringing is piccadillos. Tell us if you snuck out of the monastery and murdered someone. Tell us if you went to town and robbed a bank or a merchant, but quit wasting our time with these minor issues.

[22:41] And they didn't understand Luther. No one did. Luther didn't understand Luther. he bore an enormous burden of guilt.

There was a very telling quote from Luther. He wrote this down. He said, you ask me if I love God. Love God? Sometimes I hate God.

He said, all I see is Christ with a sword and judgment hanging over me. I know he is coming to condemn me because he couldn't live up to his laws.

Many believed in that day that if you entered into some form of ministry, you got a free pass into heaven. But Luther derived no peace from being a monk.

monk. In fact, he concluded that now he had a higher responsibility to fulfill the law of God. Well, finally, Luther became the recipient of some wonderful news.

[23:56] And it was about time he needed some good news. he was selected along with one other fellow monk on behalf of the monastery to make a pilgrimage to Rome.

And Luther was overjoyed. And he saw this as a way to finally absolve himself of his horrible sins and transgressions of the law of God.

He would go to the confessors in Rome, the holy city. And he would pattern himself from the priest who served in Rome. And Luther reasoned they must be on a higher level than he was or any monk in the German monastery.

Because they were low in the order of things and these guys are in Rome. They rub elbows with the Pope and with cardinals. So they're on this very high level, according to Luther and his rationale. Well, the two priests set out and basically walked from Germany to Rome. And Luther, when they got there, could barely contain himself.

[25 : 16] Priests were to make at least one pilgrimage in their lifetime and the only two choices were either to go to Jerusalem or to Rome. Rome. It's interesting how Islam borrowed that and said you have to go in one Hajj to Mecca in your lifetime.

So Luther was now going to be able to travel to the holy city. And when you took a pilgrimage to the holy city, you got a whole bunch of indulgences.

Now, if you're not familiar with that term, don't worry. You'll become familiar. But Luther dedicated his trip, not to himself, not to his parents who were still alive, he dedicated his trip to his dead grandparents in order to get them released from purgatory and into heaven.

Now, you've probably heard of purgatory. That's an invention of the Catholic Church. Nowhere in Scripture. a trip to Rome would be worth indulgences by which you could buy them out of purgatory and get them into heaven.

Well, it took months to walk. And when you think about it, they had to go over the Alps, for one thing. And after many months of travel, he and his fellow priests arrived in Rome.

[26 : 40] It was an experience of raw disillusionment. And Luther didn't need to be disillusioned.

He was already disillusioned. But he got there and it was raw disillusionment. The first thing that he witnessed, firsthand, of which he never saw in Germany, had no experience with this sort of thing, was the extreme level of immoral living among the Catholic clergy in the Holy City.

He was just stunned. These were the very guys that he had put on a pedestal. The priests were openly involved with prostitutes.

Openly involved. And depending upon the desire of a particular priest, there was available to him female prostitutes or male prostitutes.

So you can kind of figure we're going with that, right? Such sexual sins were not done in secret in Rome. Brothels were set up and you got right through on Main Street.

[28 : 09] The Pope's office was right over there and you went in and out. In and out. all quite open and everyone knew it. Luther wrote years later from his perspective, Rome was one huge orgy.

And that's what he considered it. Another travesty that really got to Luther was the fact that in Rome, the priests charged individuals and groups for their services.

people were in it for their services. If you wanted a wedding, they gave you a fee schedule.

They charged for their services. Luther was appalled. He also noticed the priest said the mass very quickly with no reverence.

They were in it for the money guys. And like businessmen, time was money. I got to get through this because I got a bigger funeral across town that's going to pay me double so he would hurry through and head across town.

[29 : 28] For Luther, the city of Rome in his mind was to him the city of Mecca to a Muslim. It was to be treated as a holy place where God dwelt with his people.

That was Luther's belief and what he saw was the exact opposite. The greatest anomaly that Luther experienced while in Rome had to do with his visit to the sacred stairs.

They were located in Santissimo Salvatore e Santa Genovive Baptista Evangelista in Letourneau.

Now I could say that because Italian and Spanish are both a romance language. I don't know if I did it right, but that was with some Spanish accents. I did that because I thought it would depress you greatly if I spoke Italian.

Here's what it translates. The cathedral of the most holy savior and the saints, plural, John the Baptist and John the Evangelist in the Lateran.

[30 : 38] Now that's not the Lateran we take camping. That's L-A-T-E-R-A-N. This Lateran church also housed the offices of the Pope. And the sacred stairs were a set of stairs.

Makes sense, doesn't it? They numbered 28, but tradition says these were the same stairs that Jesus ascended when he stood before Pilate in Jerusalem and was judged.

For the priests and devout Catholics that walked up and down these stairs, they were told repeatedly the Lord Jesus himself walked up and down these stairs during his trial. The stairs were dismantled in Jerusalem, transported to Rome, and rebuilt. These stairs were the focal point for devout Catholics on pilgrimages to Rome.

The church taught that if you could go up these stairs stopping at each step on your knees, go up on your knees and stop at each step to recite an Our Father or a Holy Mary, you would receive a certain amount of indulgences to get your family out of purgatory and into heaven.

[32 : 06] If you didn't have enough indulgences, you could turn in what you had and at least the priest would compute it. Well, you've reduced the time that your loved one is going to spend in purgatory by this amount.

And Luther had already planned in advance to go up these stairs on his knees because he calculated he could spring his grandparents from purgatory and get them into heaven.

Well, we're sitting here in the 21st century. Those stairs are still there. There's a poster announcing how many indulgences ascending and praying on your knees on each step is worth. they're still there. And you can go on the internet and type in that ladder in church or the sacred stairs and you can see it on the internet on YouTube. This practice is obviously steeped in superstition.

It is still in use and has not one iota of scripture to back it up. Not one. Well, when Luther got to Rome, he went up each step and recited a prayer for his grandparents before going to the next level.

[33 : 24] And after a considerable amount of time, he got to the top and he looked back down and this is what he said, who knows if this is true?

Pretty poignant, isn't it? Who knows if this is even true? And won't be a surprise to us, when he got to the top, he had another crisis of faith in the Roman system.

He had meticulously done everything required of him by the Catholic Church, but he still had no peace, no hope, and he had absolutely no sense of redemption.

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