

# The Spark that Lit The Reformation: Celebrating 500 Years

It was the best of times and it was the worst of times. It was the best for those who loved and profited from deep seated corruption, from those who rejoiced in evil and engaged in fraud, for those whom greed was a lifestyle and for whom deception was as wide and as deep as the Pacific Ocean. It was the best of times for the purveyors of all types of immorality. Indeed, the Imperial City, the Capital of the Empire was the most corrupt city in the civilized world. First time visitors to the Imperial City were often shocked at the corruption both high and low. The city was one where lawlessness abounded under the cover of officially approved lawlessness; that is, so-called legalized lawlessness.

So, it was the worst of times for those who loved truth, those who eschewed deception, for those who sought to follow the path of righteousness and justice. The corruption was so extensive it was hard to avoid being tainted by it. It was the worst of times for those who rejoiced in righteousness, holiness and honesty.

In other words, it was a day very much like our day, it was the best of times as it was the worst of times. But God was preparing a man for such a time as that.

Video of the sermon

His father was a miner and had high ambitions for his son, he wanted him to train in the law and become an attorney. The amiable young man was inclined to go that way, but God had a different plan. During law school one afternoon, Martin was caught outside in a tremendous thunder storm. Lightning struck

twice very close to him, putting him in fear for his life. In this transformative moment, he made a commitment not to continue law school, but to go to a monastery.

But even there he felt the great weight of his own sins bearing him down. As a monk he sought every discipline that could relieve him of this growing burden of guilt. He practiced extreme depravation, long fasts, deprivation of warm clothing, sleeplessness, and every devotional practice that presented itself. He piled penance on penance. He worked, studied, pleaded, wept, agonized, driving himself to somehow save his own soul. All to no avail, he felt guilty and hopeless. And he did this for ten long excruciating years before God revealed the truth that changed his life and indeed changed the world.

In the monastery at Erfurt, and then at Wittenberg, he slavishly worked to achieve eternal life and got nowhere. Martin Luther was utterly frustrated by the impossibility of pleasing a Holy God.

Luther was a living example of monastic piety, much as Saul of Tarsus was an example of Pharisaic piety, yet it got him no closer to God. If anything, Luther felt he was even more distant and it led to severe depression.

Martin's superior and weary confessor, Fr. Johannes von Staupitz heard him one night rolling in his cell, crying out: "Oh my sin, my sin, my sin, my sin!" Staupitz tried to comfort him, urging him to seek truth from the Scriptures, to find hope from the writings of Paul. So Luther poured over his Latin Vulgate translation of the Epistles of Paul hoping for light, hoping for truth, hoping for hope.

During this time, Martin was assigned to represent his monastic order in Rome. This involved a long arduous trip in winter over the Alps on foot. It would be equivalent to walking from Washington, D.C. to Denver, Colorado. He had very

high expectations for this trip to Rome, for he had been taught that Rome offered a multitude of spiritual advantages. There were, in Rome, many opportunities for obtaining valuable indulgences – pardons for your sins.

When he arrived, he ran, like a crazy saint, through all the churches and crypts and catacombs with an unquestioning faith in the legendary traditions about the relics and miracles of martyrs.

The most famous incident of Luther's stay in Rome occurred as he climbed the Sancta Scala. It was one of the most important shrines in all of Rome. It was a staircase and it was believed to be the very staircase Christ ascended and descended in His appearance before Pilate.

Just how did this massive marble staircase wind up 1,428 miles away from where it was first installed? In Luther's day, it was believed to have been magically transported from Jerusalem to Rome by the angels.

The Sancta Scala was enclosed in a small chapel just outside the church of St. John the Lateran. Pilgrims came from everywhere to climb the staircase on their knees and to kiss the steps and to pray an "Our Father." Each step gained for the faithful pilgrim and indulgence of 9 years...that is, it removed nine years from a person's stay in purgatory. There were certain steps that had crosses carved into them and each of those counted double. If a person climbed the whole staircase they procured for themselves or someone they loved a plenary indulgence, which meant a complete release from all of the temporal punishment of sin to be suffered in Purgatory. So what did Martin do when he arrived in Rome? He climbed those steps, all twenty-eight steps on his knees, kissing each step as he went and saying the necessary "Our Father" not for himself but for the benefit of his deceased grandfather.

When he got to the top and turned and looked back down Luther

himself said to himself, "Who can know if these things are so?"

But what deeply troubled Martin and shook him to the very core of his being was the terrible corruption, the rampant immorality, and the ceaseless greed of the clergy in Rome. He was shocked by the unbelief, levity and immorality of the clergy. Money and luxurious living seemed to have replaced apostolic poverty and self-denial. He saw nothing but worldly splendor at the court of Pope Julius II., who had just returned from the bloody siege of a town conducted by him in person. He heard of the fearful crimes of Pope Alexander VI. and his family, which were hardly known of in Germany, but freely spoken of as undoubted facts in the fresh remembrance of all Romans. He received the impression that "Rome, once the holiest city, was now the worst." The very people who millions were counting on for forgiveness of their sins were the most wicked and greedy people he had ever encountered. Martin began to wonder about the indulgences granted from Rome, were they really valid?

One of the sites he visited in Rome was the building of St. Peter's Dome. This magnificent structure was being funded by means of the proceeds from papal indulgences sold to the credulous believers throughout the Holy Roman Empire.

Six years after his visit to St. Peter's Dome the battle began which ended with an irrevocable separation from Rome and the birth of the Reformation.

Sometime after returning from Rome as he poured over the Epistle of Paul to the Romans Luther's dark cell was flooded with divine light. For when Luther read and pondered Romans 1:16-17, the Spirit of God gave him a "breakthrough." God revealed the truth of His word to that suffering monk, and the truth set him free. He wrote:

*"Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was*

*a sinner before God...I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners...Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place...desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.*

*At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."' There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith...it is the righteousness of God revealed by the gospel, that is, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith...Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates...And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word 'righteousness of God.' Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise."*

Hear again the Word of God: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith." (Rom. 1:16-17)

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