

"One Man's Search and a Reformation"

It was the year 1505, a warm, humid day in July. A young man slowly trudged over a dry, dusty road outside the Saxon village of Stotternheim. The young man was short, yet stocky, and wore the garb of a university student. As he came near the village, the sky darkened. There was a sudden shower, then a violent summer storm. A bolt of lightning struck and knocked the man to the ground. As the famous historian Roland Bainton wrote: "Struggling to rise he cried in terror, 'Saint Anne help me! I will become a monk!'"

The young student who in that moment of panic vowed to go into a monastery was Martin Luther. The awful fear that he experienced that day when he cried to Saint Anne, the patron saint of miners, was by no means the only terror this man felt. Martin Luther was a man of the 16th century. He lived in the age of the Medieval Church. In every town where he studied he saw evidences of the Church of the Middle Ages. Cathedrals...monasteries...priests...monks...collections of holy relics...ringing of bells...the proclaiming of indulgences...religious processions.

Aspects of German paganism were woven into the religious beliefs of these simple folk. They thought the woods were full of elves, fairies, mermaids and witches. God was pictured alternately as God the merciful Father, but also God the wrathful, thundering, vengeful God. So, people were driven by *fear* to the sacraments of the Church, hoping to escape the burning fires of hell.

Martin Luther was by no means unaffected by the religious mood and beliefs of his time. He feared death. He was afraid of a wrathful, angry God. He suffered periods of extreme depression. All of those inward feelings and fears came to a head that day when lightning struck. Surely this was a sign from heaven! He'd have to do the right thing to save his soul. He would become a priest!

Within several weeks this 21 year-old law student entered an Augustinian monastery. Here, he would devote himself entirely to the celibate life: poverty, renouncing of self-will, rigorous fasting, simple clothing, the shame of begging, the demanding negation of fleshly desires. All of this...in order *find his peace with God and save his soul*.

Yet, in the monastery, Luther was still a confused, distraught man. He was trying to save himself through exhaustive religious activity and self-denial. He prayed long prayers, tortured his body – even to the point where his body suffered permanent damage. Yet, the more he did, the more he felt God was displeased with him.

He tried rigorous confession – hour by hour – sometimes minute by minute going to confession. It was so bad that one time his confessor said, "For heaven's sake, man, go out and commit some sin worth confessing!" He thought he could tap into the merits of the saints, so that he might be able to get days, or months, or years off purgatory. Yet he never knew how much time one had to spend in purgatory to begin with.

He made a business trip to Rome – Rome, where there were more religious relics than anywhere else. People thought by visiting Rome and viewing these relics that one could get years off purgatory. These so-called "relics" included the supposed bodies of Peter and Paul, pieces of Jesus' cross, even a piece of Moses' burning bush, and a feather from the Holy Spirit when He came in the form of a dove! But still, Luther remained a tortured soul. How could he love God. "I hate Him," Luther cried!

One of the superiors in the monastery was worried about Luther – obviously for good reason! So he sent Luther off to study the Bible. In his study, Martin Luther came across Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me...". These words from Psalm 22 were quoted by Jesus on the cross. Jesus knew something of the God-forsakenness that Luther was experiencing.

Then Luther came across Romans 1:17, a verse that refers to the *justice of God*. He read the words, "The just shall live by faith." After months of study, a slow process was taking place, whereby he finally saw God and Christ in a new way. This was what Martin Luther wrote about that new discovery: "I took the expression 'the justice of God' to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in *punishing* the unjust...night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by faith'. Then I grasped that the *justice* of God is that righteousness which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on new meaning, and whereas before 'the justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love...this passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven."

Martin Luther also became acutely aware of the meaning of "faith". Whereas the Medieval Church regarded faith as intellectual assent to the teachings of the Church (believing the right stuff, adhering to the right doctrines and religious teachings, etc.). Luther now saw that faith was really *trust in God, a personal relationship with God!*

What I've described – one man's struggle to find salvation and acceptance with God – eventually altered the course of human history! When this brilliant, but troubled, young man found his *peace with God*, it ignited a flame that gave rise to the *Protestant Reformation* – the birth of the Protestant Church! Afterwards in other places God would raise up people like Calvin, Zwingli, and John Wesley, and God's Church would be reborn and renewed.

Today, October 31st, is "Reformation Day". During the Protestant Reformation, when the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church and eventually others like the Methodist Church were formed, a handful of fundamental truths in Scripture that had been forgotten or blurred were now *rediscovered*.

One of the most important of these truths inherent in Scripture that was rediscovered is that of justification by faith. Romans 5:1 speaks of this powerfully: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Justified by faith"! Now when we talk about "justification by faith" we've got a problem. *Who talks about this in normal conversation?* When's the last time you chatted with a neighbor, or someone at work, or on the golf course, about justification by faith? People would say, "What?" I also have a sneaking suspicion that if you ask a lot of regular church goers to describe what "justification by faith" is all about, it would draw some blank stares! Yet this is a theme at the heart and center of our faith!

"Justification" in the Bible means "to be brought into a right relationship." If I'm "justified" with you, it means I'm in a right relationship with you, and you with me. Things are fine between us. If I'm "justified" with God it means I'm in a right relationship with God. I'm OK. I'm acceptable to my Creator.

Wait a minute. Aren't we OK with God as we are? I mean, God loves us. Most of us are pretty decent human beings. Except for a few really bad eggs! No. Actually, we're not OK as we are. There is a part of every one of us that tends to turn away from God and live life our own way. The Bible's word for this is "sin". And because of this – our "sin" – our relationship with our Creator has been spoiled.

When we are "justified" with God, God restores the relationship with Himself that sin ruined. As someone has said, "justification" means it's "just-as-if" I had never sinned!

I think it's fair to say that most people today aren't like Martin Luther! We don't lose any sleep worrying about our burning in hell! We're not torturing ourselves physically or mentally as Luther did, obsessively asking, "Am I right with God?" Most of us don't believe in a God who is so angry and vindictive that we hate Him.

But maybe there are other ways that we sense things aren't right between us and our Creator. Perhaps it's a feeling of guilt – if not for specific things we've done wrong, just an inward feeling that we're not as good a person as God intended us to be, even as good a person as *we'd* like to be. Or maybe in our more thoughtful moments we feel kind of empty – like why was I put here? What's my purpose? Or it could be that we do have a longing for God – but God seems so far away, and we feel alone. And, yes, there might be some of us like Martin Luther, who for some reason have come to hate God, and feel God's angry with us and out to get us.

So, can we find peace with God? Can we be sure we are acceptable to Him? Can we have a relationship with our Creator marked by warmth and intimacy? Yes we can! And it's possible *through Jesus*. Listen to the Bible's description of how this happens: "When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God

because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God" (Romans 5:6-11 New Living Translation). While we were helpless, still in our sins, Christ died for us. We are made right with God by His sacrifice on the cross. Our relationship with God has been restored. We're friends, the enmity is gone.

Martin Luther went to agonizing ends to try to win God's approval – by living a good life, by becoming a priest, by exhaustive religious disciplines. And none of that brought him a sense of peace with God. Romans 3:20 says, "For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands." In other words, we can't make ourselves acceptable to God by doing good and begin religious. Romans 3:24 says, "(We) are justified by his grace as a gift." God offers forgiveness of our sins and a relationship with Him *as a gift*. *Faith* means we trust God and accept that gift. And when that happens, it changes us! Martin Luther said, "I felt *reborn*."

Justification by faith. Luther discovered this truth at the heart and center of our faith, and it led to a reformation that changed the Church and changed the world! Some 200 years later, John Wesley (like Luther) struggled to find assurance of salvation and his acceptance with God, and when he did, it changed his life. Methodism was born, and English society in the 1700's was renewed and changed as a spinoff from that.

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). _Have you and I found the life-changing power of these words! We are made acceptable to God by what Christ has done for us. And that's a gift!

Stuart Hamblen was a singer-songwriter, but he sings a song written by his wife that describes the simple faith that makes us right with God.

"The wondrous gift that Jesus offers me, if I but lift my heart desirously; He only waits the venture of my faith, to prove the miracle of His redeeming grace.

I stumble over such simplicity. Lord, I do believe, help thou my unbelief; must I refuse the gift until I understand? It's mine the moment that I let Him take my hand.

How wise that nothing should depend on me, except that I be willing to receive; I find that even faith is part of His sweet gift, when in my weakness my heart to Him I lift.

Lord, will within my heart that will to obey, break my stubborn will that stands in the way; I would know the miracle of sweet release. Lord, I do believe, help thou my unbelief."

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