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# Storms, Fear, and a Tower: Lessons from the Life of Martin Luther

Markus McDowell

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In July of the year 1505, a university student walked down a road that led to the village of Stotternheim in Germany. As he neared the village, a rainstorm began. Soon his clothes were soaked through to his skin. A bolt of lightning exploded nearby, knocking him to the ground. Rolling into a ditch beside the road, he shouted, “Saint Anne, help me! I will become a monk!”

Fear can elicit such vows. Later, during a sunny day enjoying a cup of tea, we might forget or rationalize our vow. Not this young man. He kept his vow and came to have a significant impact on Germany, Christianity, and the world. A statute in his honor stands beside the Rhein River in the town of Worms—part of a monument of statutes, arranged in a square, of important Reformation leaders. In the middle, towering above all, stands a statue of this man: Martin Luther.

He was born on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben. His father was a humble peasant who had worked his way up to being the owner of copper mines. He wanted his son to become a lawyer, to better the social and economic fortunes of the Luther family. So Martin earned a bachelor’s and master’s degree at the University of Erfurt, then enrolled in law school.

The July storm wrought a change. He dropped out of law school and entered an Augustinian monastery. His father was livid. But Martin was a fervent man, and he brought the same attitude towards being a monk that he had to studying law. He spent hours in prayer, took pilgrimages, fasted often, and even engaged in self-flagellation. He thought a monk should have a clear conscience before God. Yet the more he did, the more he became aware of his sins. He attended confession daily, sometimes for hours. Often, when he left the confessional, he would remember another sin and immediately return. His Father Confessor said, “Look here, if you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive—parricide, blasphemy, adultery—instead of all these peccadilloes.”<sup>1</sup>

For Martin, there were no small sins. He could not approach God without being pure, yet he found it impossible to be so. He had a deep sense of the holiness of God. A second of anger or selfishness demonstrated his unworthiness. We might have told him, “No one is perfect, Martin—surely a loving God understands.” He would likely agree, but he also believed that saying some sins are not that serious ran the risk of taking the cross too lightly (another sin). He warned against “the cleverness of memory in protecting the ego.”<sup>2</sup> He thought the Adam and Eve narrative exemplified this danger. When God asked Adam, “Did you eat of the fruit of the tree?” Adam responded, “The woman *who you gave me* is at fault” (italics added). Eve blamed the serpent.<sup>3</sup> Martin wrote that we all do the same: “It is someone else’s fault” or “It didn’t hurt anyone.” If one believes God is a most holy Creator God, then even peccadilloes matter.

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1. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), 41.

2. Bainton, 55.

3. Genesis 11–13.

## The Fear of God

Martin was ordained in 1507. In presiding over his first Mass, he rose to offer the prayer of consecration over the bread of communion. He began the prayer, “We offer unto thee, the living, the true, the eternal God . . .” He froze, unable to speak. He began to perspire. As the silence stretched out, the congregation began to stir. Luther finally left the altar and sat down. Later he wrote about the experience:

At these words I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, “With what tongue shall I address such majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or my hands to the Divine Majesty? The angels surround him. At his nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say ‘I want this, I ask for that’? For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal, and the true God.”<sup>4</sup>

There is no question that Martin was an unusual person. Some have even suggested that he had psychological problems.<sup>5</sup> His sense of the overwhelming holiness of God may be lost on many of us. Perhaps it is because our culture places little value on humility and subservience, or that our experience of grace leads to (inappropriate?) familiarity. Regardless, Martin understood that it was one thing to fall victim to a storm—quite another to fall into the hands of the living God. The experience led Martin to explore how one can live under the cross without a debilitating fear of a holy God.

## A Tower Experience

Johann von Staupitz, Martin's superior and friend at the monastery, ordered him to pursue an academic career in theology. Though Martin resisted at first, he eventually obtained a bachelor's degree and doctorate in 1512. During the time he pursued these degrees, he taught: lecturing on the Psalms and then the book of Romans. True to the Christian humanism he had learned at university, he studied the original sources—the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures.

Intense study of the biblical text had a great effect. As he studied Romans in his tower room at the monastery, he encountered the Greek word *dikaiosyne*. This word was usually translated as “*Gerechtigkeit*” in German (and usually as “righteousness” in English). But that Greek word had subtle shades of meaning that are not easy to translate. Luther realized that *dikaiosyne* did not refer to human *attempts* to be righteous, but rather to something that God *bestowed* upon humans. Like a judge who, having seen the mountain of evidence against a defendant and knowing he is guilty, declares him innocent. It was an epiphany for Martin.

This event shaped Martin's view of what it meant to live as a believer. His sins were forgiven when he confessed them—not because he had “worked them off,” but because God declared them so. He was then free to go live like a free person rather than in fear of his next sin. Martin continued to work just as hard as had before this experience—in prayer, study, teaching, and service—but he did so out of gratitude of a great debt forgiven, rather than fear of not being “good enough.” He began to rethink his theology and, as a consequence, set the course of church history and theology.

Martin was reflecting, in his own time, what the writers of the New Testament meant by being free in Christ. The words of Scripture that are translated “ransom” and “redemption” refer to a slave who, having been purchased, is set free. It is a magnificent gift from the one who paid the price, and a debt that could never be repaid. The freed person could only live a life that honored the redeemer.

The popular view of Martin Luther is that he called for reform of a corrupt church. He did, but it was his focus on scripture (*sola scriptura*), not his calls for reform, which caused conflicts with his own church leadership on the issues of indulgences, the cult of Christian saints, monasticism, the structure of the Roman

4. Bainton, 30.

5. See, for example, Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (Austen Riggs Monograph; W.W. Norton & Co., 1993).

Catholic Church, and even some of the functions of the Pope. He did not reject these practices because he saw corruption in them (though true in some cases). He rejected them because he found no scriptural basis for them.

The Pope responded to Luther's critiques by stating that he was a "drunken German . . . when he sobers up he will change his mind."<sup>6</sup> Later, at a conference of Augustinian monks in Heidelberg, Luther presented many of his arguments in detail. He was branded a heretic, but continued to study and write. His writings circulated widely throughout Europe and, after much back and forth between Luther and church and state leaders, he was summoned to Worms. He was asked to renounce or reaffirm his writings. Luther stood before a table stacked with his books and pamphlets, and said to the representatives of the Pope, the Church, and the German State:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason—for can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves—I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant anything, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound.<sup>7</sup>

According to tradition, Luther then said, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."<sup>8</sup>

On May 25, 1521, Luther was declared an outlaw and a heretic and his literature was banned. Hiding at the Castle of Wartburg, he continued to speak and to write. He finished a German translation of the New Testament from Greek—one of the first translations into a modern language.<sup>9</sup> He stayed in hiding for the next twenty years, occasionally appearing at other diets and engaging the State and the Church. Others took up the banner of *sola scriptura*, his theology, and his reform. Martin died, both a heretic and a hero, on February 18, 1546, in Eisleben.

### **The Cross-Shaped Life: Fear and Service**

Luther did nothing halfway. His brush with death during the storm caused him to make a vow, and he did all he could to fulfill it. When he was unable to stand before a congregation and speak for God, he struggled to understand why. When he found that Scripture contradicted what he believed, he threw himself into the study of that new understanding and opposed the church.

Luther feared God more than he feared ridicule, his father's disapproval, loss of friends, arrest, and persecution—even more than he feared death. It grew out of his gratitude to God and the message of the cross. It is what we would call a cross-shaped view of life: rejecting status and rights, taking on the attitude of a servant, and practicing humility—all grounded in gratitude. Paul called the Christians at Philippi to have that same attitude<sup>10</sup>; he announced that he would boast of nothing but the cross<sup>11</sup> and his own weaknesses.<sup>12</sup>

It is always easier to criticize than it is to create, to tear down rather than build up, to look down one's nose than to look up in humility. Luther's fear of God was not an erroneous psychology: God as creator, sustainer, and judge of the universe *should* be terrifying. Luther's problem, if our historians and theologians

6. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 7:99; W.G. Polack, *The Story of Luther* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1931), 45.

7. This is Oberman's translation from Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: A Man Between God and the Devil*, transl. by E. Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 39, based on the Proceedings of the Imperial Diet in German (*Duetsche Reichstagsakten unter Kaiser Karl V.*, vols I—, edited by *Historische Commissions bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, [Gotha, 1893—]; 2nd ed. [reprint] [Göttingen, 1962—]).

8. Bainton, 180.

9. The importance of these translations cannot be underestimated. They made the Bible accessible to all Germans who could read and helped standardize the German language as a landmark in German literature.

10. Philippians 5.2–8.

11. 2 Cor 10.17; Gal 6.14.

12. 2 Cor 11.30; 12.5, 9.

read him aright, was that he did not also understand that God is the definition of love. Luther's genuine fear of the divine led him to focus on his own inability. Once he grasped some understanding of the divine love of God, that same fear led him to focus on gratitude and self-sacrificial service.

Living a cross-shaped life will almost always be countercultural. In our time, it is popular to stand up for "rights"—individual or group. There is little about that which is countercultural. After all, few people are against human rights. The issue for us, like Luther, is not the end goals of such causes, but the driving philosophy—the motivation. It is about seeing our causes from the perspective the cross and not the other way around. It is easy to feel righteous when fighting for social rights or human rights, but there is always the danger, for believers, that we may be riding a cultural ethic or movement driven by nontheological motives. The grounds behind a cause determine the method and attitude of the proponents. A hashtag, a popular catch phrase, or a political meme is a cheap theological stance, not unlike Bonhoeffer's "cheap grace."<sup>13</sup> Because it is shallow and ungrounded, it is open to wide interpretation. Lacking definition, it means nothing and therefore everything. So it requires little or no *personal* sacrifice, garners little or no criticism, and does not require humility, humiliation, or weakness.<sup>14</sup>

Luther seemed willing to be ostracized, humiliated, and even arrested or exiled. This is not to say he was perfect, of course. In fact, we would say he was quite wrong about both theology and social or political causes. Some of his political stances against Jews and peasants would be deemed un-cross-like by us. Each of us is a child of our own age, and it is impossible to detach oneself completely from his or her context. Our culture affects us, and therefore it affects our theology.<sup>15</sup> However, this did not keep Luther cowering in fear of being wrong—he knew the cross was enough to cover that, too.

### Love and Boldness

"Sin boldly!" is a phrase of Luther's that has sometimes been misinterpreted or little understood. Luther wrote the phrase in letter to a friend, Philip Melancthon, on August 1, 1521. The words, within their context, have a powerful meaning for our topic. Here is the entire paragraph:

Be a sinner, and sin boldly, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. We will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides. We, however, says Peter (2 Peter 3:13) are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign. It suffices that through God's glory we have recognized the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day. Do you think such an exalted Lamb paid merely a small price with a meager sacrifice for our sins? Pray hard, for you are quite a sinner.<sup>16</sup>

For Luther, "sinning boldly" meant that a Christian should not constantly live in fear of his or her sin, and therefore lose an orientation of gratitude and service. Note how his focus is on the sacrifice of the cross and the price paid for it. This is what a person who had been consumed with "works-righteousness" needed to know.<sup>17</sup> A person consumed with "total freedom through grace"—the opposite of Luther—probably needs to

13. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press Ltd.), 35–47.

14. This, of course, raises questions about "ends justifying means" and "might makes right," which can be difficult and complex philosophical and theological issues.

15. When Luther translated the New Testament, he left out Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation because he thought they did not fit the theology salvation he found in Romans. Luther's personal experience with grace blinded him to the different context and purposes of those books, just as we are often blinded by our experiences and contexts.

16. From Luther's letter to Philip Melancthon, dated Aug 1, 1521, from Wartburg Castle. Public domain.

17. The weary debate about works versus faith misses a crucial point. Of course we cannot save ourselves by our works—but the holiness of God and the sacrifice of the cross demand that we practice holy lives. Otherwise, we demean God and who he is. I sometimes wonder if I don't fear everything but God: I fear failure, I feel looking stupid, I fear not fitting in, I fear being criticized, and I fear making myself vulnerable to others.

hear more about the fear of God!<sup>18</sup> But for those of us who struggle with being “good enough”—whether out of fear of God or fear of human condemnation—Luther’s words are a comforting salve. He emphasizes “no fear,” but more importantly, trust in Christ, a perspective on eternity rather than today, and urges believers to “pray hard!”

### Here We Stand

Early in Luther’s life, he wrote that he did not love God. He hated him because he was such a terrifying entity. Later, Luther wrote that he came to love God because he understood God’s grace—yet he never abandoned his understanding of the holiness of God, which still terrified to him.

Perhaps we do not want a God who judges. Instead, maybe we prefer a God who says, “It’s all right; don’t worry.” Perhaps we dismiss the idea of a God who rages, and prefer a God who is our friend. A radical non-judgmentalism is often emphasized in our Western societies (though less practiced than pontificated upon). This was not Martin’s view of God. We should be able offer thanks to God with hands raised and eyes closed in the ecstasy of his love, while equally able to fall to our knees in fear of his wrath. God’s grace is significant precisely because he is a God of great and terrifying holiness—which is why it is so freeing when he extends grace and forgiveness. He *does* judge; that is why his mercy means so much.

The message of Luther’s life, as it has come down to us, calls us to live boldly for God, but with humility. Part of this is recognizing our own failures and working in and through them by the grace of God. But more important, perhaps, is that Luther’s life urges us to practice what we say we believe regardless of the cost, whether it be personal or worldly failure, ridicule, suffering, or even arrest and death.

At the foot of the cross, we can see the cost of the debt that was paid for us. We can view the world through a cross-shaped prism of grace and mercy, ready to serve with our own cross-shaped life. Here we stand. We can do no other.

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18. The latter was an issue being faced in some of the later letters of the Gospel of John, a libertinism that perhaps grew out of gnostic elements in Greek and Jewish culture. Those who suggest Luther’s views contradict the letter of James are missing the differing contexts and purposes of the two letters.