

Celebrating 500 Years of the Protestant Reformation

The 31st of October, 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. In this article I want to give a brief overview of the life and struggles of a 16th century Catholic monk by the name of Martin Luther. This introduction will lead us to look at a passage of scripture from the New Testament book of Romans which became a life changing passage for Luther and would uncover a precious biblical truth that had been largely hidden for a thousand years. The following historical overview comes from a number of available sources.

Some suggest that the old saying, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely," would be a fair description of Medieval Catholicism. In those days a largely uneducated working class of men and women were taught that a relationship with God could only come through the Catholic Church and her Popes, Bishops, Priests, Cardinals, etc. Given the fact that many people rightly believed that knowing God was an all-important part of life, for the present and the future, this situation was ripe for abuse and corruption. Although he couldn't have known it then, there was much that needed reforming in the Church when Martin Luther became an Augustinian monk in July 1505, at the age of 22.

Shortly prior to entering the monastery Luther, who was very sensitive about his sinfulness and had a dreadful fear of death and Hell, was unexpectedly caught outdoors in a fierce thunderstorm. When the horrifying sound of thunder and a blinding flash of lightning came very close to him, Luther felt as if God himself was coming to punish him. He was terrified and screamed out in desperation, "Ste. Anne, protect me!" In that moment Luther made a promise that if he survived this storm he would become a monk. Historians record that Luther's sensitivity and fear continued even after entering the monastery. Rightly acknowledging that mankind is sinful and that God is perfectly holy, Luther would sit in the confession booth for hours naming and confessing his sins hoping that, by this act of contrition, he might be accepted by God. He was terrified that if he failed to remember even one sin he would surely be condemned to Hell forever! Many times, after spending hours in the confession booth he would leave, but then soon return because he became aware of some sin that he had forgotten to confess. Needless to say, Luther was miserable and found no relief in the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance.

To help assuage Luther's tender conscience, his spiritual advisor suggested that he read some of the teachers of Mysticism. He was actually captivated by it for a time. The Mystics taught that the answer for our sin was love. All that one needed to do was to love God, and everything else in your life would fall into place. Yet, Luther soon came to believe that loving God was not all that easy. If God is supposed to be a loving Father, as the Scriptures proclaimed, why is it that he demands so much of us? Weren't we required to be perfect? (Matthew 5:48) Luther believed himself to be an impeccable monk and was as faithful to the church's teaching as any human could possibly be, yet he found no relief for his troubled heart.

Ordinarily, any monk having this much difficulty would not be allowed to teach others but that's exactly what Luther's superior thought that he should do. He was ordered to enter the new University of Wittenberg to prepare to teach the scriptures. In 1512 he received his doctorate in theology, yet still struggled to answer the same nagging question: "How can sinful mankind ever be made right with a perfectly Holy God?" In 1515, he began lecturing on the Epistle of Romans. His life changing discovery came after a serious study of Romans 1:16-17: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes....For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" Luther's rediscovery of the truth of this ancient text would give him the answer that he'd been searching for. We'll begin to unpack this amazing text in my next article.

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