

CAPTIVE TO THE WORD

*Martin Luther: Doctor of
Sacred Scripture*

by

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*"I am bound by the Scriptures . . .
and my conscience is captive
to the Word of God".*

Martin Luther



THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

SBN: 85364 087 4

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AUSTRALIA:

*Emu Book Agencies Pty., Ltd.,
511, Kent Street, Sydney, N.S.W.*

CANADA:

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NEW ZEALAND:

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Royal Oak, Auckland, 6*

SOUTH AFRICA:

*Oxford University Press,
P.O. Box 1141, Thibault House,
Thibault Square, Cape Town*

*Made and Printed in Great Britain for
The Paternoster Press Paternoster House
3 Mount Radford Crescent Exeter Devon
by Cox & Wyman Limited Fakenham*

CHAPTER II

LUTHER'S STRUGGLE FOR FAITH

THE BIOGRAPHERS OF LUTHER — ESPECIALLY THE MORE recent ones — have devoted many pages and even chapters to his agonizing search for peace of soul. Some have been mainly concerned to sift the factual evidence, and there is a measure of confusion in the sources. Some have sought to relate Luther's spiritual awakening to his theological development, and this connexion must never be overlooked. Some have probed deep into Luther's complex personality with the aid of psychological criteria and have exposed hitherto unrecognized factors, not all of which bear the stamp of verisimilitude.¹

Yet the abiding fascination of Luther's struggle for faith does not reside in any of these more theoretical aspects. What holds our interest is the realization that all of us share to some degree in the great reformer's experiences. Luther was no mystical figure, removed from the sin and strife of life as we know it, but a man of like passions with ourselves. His is the quest of everyman for a valid and satisfying form of belief. Our concern, as Roland Bainton suggests, is not so much with the disease as with the cure. "How was it that Luther, despite his travailing of spirit, could be so tremendous in his faith, so incredible in his courage, so astounding in his output?"¹ Those who are involved in Luther's battle long to taste his victory.

It is our purpose in this chapter to trace Luther's conflict of soul before his crucial encounter with a gracious God at Wittenberg, and to show how it was only as he came to a fuller understanding of the Scriptures that he was led out of the darkness of doubt and frustration into the light of assurance and fulfilment. But it would be unrealistic to imply that Luther's struggle was confined to the period prior to his illumination. This would be an oversimplification, as well as a distortion of the facts. Luther never altogether ceased to struggle. The Christian life for him was always a warfare. Faith was not passive acquiescence, but "a living busy, active mighty thing".² No longer, of course, did he have to agonize for faith, but he continually agonized in faith. And on occasions the contest was fierce indeed.

It was not until he entered the monastery that Luther became aware of

¹ Roland H. Bainton, *Studies on the Reformation* (1964), p. 13.

² LW. 35. 370.

spiritual tensions in an acute form. There had indeed been some hints in his childhood and youth which presaged the impending onslaught, but he had supposed that when he became a monk his problems would be resolved. Just the reverse proved to be the case, for he found that the medieval prescription for anxiety failed to meet his need. It was as a result of his dissatisfaction with the traditional remedy that he was compelled to seek for another, and was ultimately enabled to find it through the guidance of God's Word. Luther's struggle for faith took place, then, during his years between his reception into the Augustinian cloister at Erfurt in 1505 and his *Türmerlebnis*, or tower experience, which probably occurred in 1514.¹

Before we deal with that critical period, a word must be said about what preceded it. We cannot altogether set aside the influence of Luther's upbringing. The child is father to the man. As Vivian Green reminds us, "he imbibed and never lost the religious mythology of his peasant background."² There was a curious mixture of the Gothic and the Christian in what he had been taught to believe. It left him with a sharpened awareness of the supernatural, and in particular of the antipathy between the forces of good and evil. The universe was a stage on which was acted out the drama of redemption. The devil and all his satellites were locked in unending conflict with the armies of our God and of His Christ. No doubt the victory would be won – indeed it had been won at the cross and the empty tomb – but the assurance of final triumph did not altogether relieve the intensity of the contemporary contest.

This sense of strain was accentuated by the conception of God which had been engendered by Luther's environment and early training. It would not be true to say that he had never heard of God as Father, but that aspect of His character was nevertheless obscured by a much more vivid emphasis on His anger. He was a wielder of thunderbolts who might at any moment strike down those who displeased Him, and who at the close of life would consign to unspeakable tortures those who had failed to reach the required standard of behaviour in His sight. This frightening portrait of a God whose wrath was untempered with mercy even cast its shadow on the face of his Son, the Saviour. Luther found no more comfort in Christ than he had in the Father. "From childhood on I knew I had to turn pale and be terror-stricken when I heard the name of Christ; for I was taught only to see him as a strict and wrathful judge."³ Little wonder, then, that throughout his adolescence Luther was subject to moods of depression, and that in the six months before he decided to take the monastic vow he was in a veritable agony.

¹ Cf. below, p. 57.

² Vivian H. H. Green, *Luther and the Reformation* (1964), p. 28; cf. Robert H. Fife, *The Revolt of Martin Luther* (1957), pp. 12-14.

³ EA. I. 261. Cf. Scheel, *op. cit.*, Bd. I, p. 20.

Luther's struggle for faith, falling as it does in the period when he was a monk first in Erfurt and then in Wittenberg, is flanked by two decisive experiences. At the farthest extreme stands his encounter with God in the tower. This we might well regard as his evangelical conversion, although we must not press the parallel too hard. But at the outset there is his call to the cloister, and this carries with it some of the features of a crisis experience. Certainly it was in the providence of God that Luther was brought into the Augustinian community, for it was here that he came to recognize his need of grace, and here too that he was able to look into the Word and find out how he could get right with God. To be sure, there was much anguish of spirit and many sore buffetings to be endured, but we cannot dismiss Luther's entry into the monastery as a mere accident.

Crotus Rubeanus, who had been a room-mate of Luther in his hall of residence at Erfurt, and who blossomed forth as one of the leading humanists of the age, wrote to the reformer in 1519 to encourage him in his task. He reminded Luther that God himself had destined him for his mission when he was flung to the ground outside the town of Erfurt by a stab of lightning. This was what drove Luther into the monastery, and Crotus Rubeanus did not hesitate to compare what happened to the experience of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road.¹ Luther himself has left a statement in an open letter to his father which was prefixed to his tract *Monastic vows* (1521). In it he reveals that he did not become a monk by his own choice, but was "called by terrors from heaven," . . . "walled in by the terror and the agony of sudden death and forced by necessity to take the vow."²

According to the *Table Talk*, Luther recalled in 1539 that the 2nd of July was the anniversary of the momentous day when he entered the priory.³ He identified the spot as Stotternheim, about a mile north from Erfurt. He was so frightened by the thunderstorm that when he was thrown down he invoked the aid of St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, and there and then pledged himself to become a religious. It may well have been, as Boehmer suggests, that the lightning was merely the catalyst of a decision which had been building up in Luther's mind over many months or even years.⁴ He himself informs us that the melancholia which overtook him in the spring of 1505 arose from a spiritual source. It has been thought by some that the sudden death of a fellow-student of whom he had been particularly fond was the occasion of Luther's depression, but there was more to it than that. It was, so he says, *tentatio tristitiae*, anxiety over his sins and fear of judgment to come.⁵

Luther's decision to enter the monastery, then, was not the result of un-

¹ WAB. I. 543.

² LW 48. 332; WATR. 4. 440. No. 4707; cf. Oergel, op. cit., p. 27.

³ WATR. 4. 440. No. 4707.

⁴ Boehmer, op. cit., p. 34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

premeditated impulse. It is more likely that, as Boehmer puts it, "a resolution which had long been prepared for in the inner struggles of the last month, but which had been repressed until now by doubts and scruples of one kind or another, suddenly came to expression in that moment of extreme nervous tension. For Luther was one of those men who make decisions only after long and tenacious struggles, but whose decisions are crystallized abruptly in a moment of tempestuous activity. We may even conclude that, inwardly, he was already on the way to the monastery before the lightning flashed down on him at Stotternheim. The convulsive fear which seized him in that moment only hastened the decision but did not call forth the mood from which it sprang."¹ Strohl comes to a similar conclusion: "The stroke of lightning merely made him aware of what was already in his soul."²

Whatever may have led up to Luther's vow, the consequences which flowed from it were considerable. Although it was to point him down a road which did not bring him to his desired destination, it nevertheless marks the beginning of his preparation as a reformer. He now advertised the fact that he wanted to give his life to God. Although not at all in the way which he himself envisaged, God took him at his word. In one sense, everything that Luther eventually became stems from this decision. "The kept vow," declares John M. Todd, "is a pivot from which in general proceed all the later developments."³ Luther had a profound impression which never left him, that somehow his life had been overruled from above. It was not so much that he had made a vow, but that a vow had been made for him.⁴

There were no less than six monasteries in Erfurt at this time. There was the Benedictine abbey on Peter's Hill, the Carthusian in the southern area, the Dominican convent on the left bank of the river, the Franciscan on the right, and the little cloister of the Servites, or servants of the Virgin, at the Krämpfer Gate, in addition to the Augustinian chapter-house. Why, asks Boehmer, did Luther choose the latter? There is no specific clue in Luther's writings, but the supposition is that he opted for the Black Cloister, as it was commonly known, because here "he could hope soonest to reach the goal of 'evangelical perfection' toward which he was striving."⁵ The Erfurt chapter was attached to the stricter Observantist wing of the Eremites, originally founded in Italy but later introduced into Germany with a reformed constitution. It had a reputation as being the foremost centre of spiritual life. No doubt this was what prompted Luther to apply for admission. He was concerned to save his soul, and this seemed the likeliest place to help him. He was to be disappointed in the guidance he

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

² Strohl, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

³ John M. Todd, *Martin Luther: A Biographical Study* (1964), p. 25.

⁴ LW. 54. 109. No. 623, 338. No. 4414. ⁵ Boehmer, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

got, but the very failure of even the best in monasticism drove him to the Word and to the feet of God alone.

Until September 1505 Luther was on probation, so that the state of his soul might be observed and it could be made clear that his call was indeed of God. At his reception as a novice, the first question put to him by the prior, Winand von Diedenhofen, was one which went to the heart of the matter as far as Luther was concerned. "What do you desire?" he was asked. And his reply, according to the rubric, was equally significant: "God's grace and mercy." After he was invested with his habit — a white house-dress over which a black mantle was worn, with a leather sash — the prior closed the ceremony with these words: "The Lord clothe you with the new man, according to which you were created in righteousness and true holiness." At his profession for the priesthood in September 1506, the prior admonished him in the customary fashion: "Keep this rule, and I promise you eternal life."¹ This, of course, was the disciplinary code of his order. Luther was determined at all costs to be obedient. "I had no other thoughts, but to keep my rule."²

How diligent he was in this respect is indicated by independent evidence. In 1543 the Jena theologian, Matthias Flacius, met a friar who had been with Luther at Erfurt, and who readily conceded that he "lived a holy life among them, kept the rule most exactly, and studied diligently."³ This was Luther's own testimony. "For I was a good monk, and kept strictly to my order, so that I could say that if the monastic life could get a man to heaven, I should have entered: all my companions who knew me would bear witness to that."⁴ Attempts have been made in the past to cast doubts on the integrity of Luther in this respect. It used to be part of the stock-in-trade of Roman Catholic denigrators like Denifle and Grisar to make out that he was irresponsible and undisciplined, if not also morally depraved.⁵ Joseph Lortz has repudiated this misrepresentation on the part of his biased predecessors in the line of anti-Protestant polemic, and another son of Rome, Thomas M. McDonough, can rejoice to report that "all historians of our age agree that the material evidence portrays Luther as a zealous and exemplary Augustinian, obedient to his superiors and faithful to the monastic rule."⁶

In all this, his aim was solely to please God and not man. Luther did not have it in him to be double-minded. "I myself was a monk for twenty years. I tortured myself with prayers, fasting, vigils, and freezing: the frost alone might have killed me. It caused me pain such as I will never

¹ WA. 51. 83; 40. i. 244. ² WA. 47. 92; 40. ii. 15. ³ Scheel, *op. cit.*, Bd I, p. 10 n. i.

⁴ WA. 38. 143. Cf. WA. 40. i. 685 — "ego war ein rechter fromer Monch"; LW. 26. 458.

⁵ Heinrich Denifle, *Luther und Lutherthum*, Bd. I (1904), pp. 215-18, 245-51; Hartmann Grisar, *Luther*, Vol. I (E.T. 1913), pp. 26, 79, 110-12.

⁶ Joseph Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland* (1941), Bd. I, p. 159; Thomas M. McDonough, *The Law and the Gospel in Luther* (1963), p. 31.

inflict on myself again, even if I could. What else did I seek by doing this but God, who was supposed to note my strict observance of the monastic order and my austere life? I did all this for the sake of God, not for money or goods."¹ His self-inflicted privations were harsh indeed. Luther was not the man to do things by halves. If there was anything in asceticism, then he must go all the way with it. "I vexed myself with fasts and prayers beyond what was common," he admitted.² And later he declared: "If I could have got to heaven by fasting, I would have merited that twenty years ago."³

But all his fierce self-punishment did not bring him peace. How could it? He was seeking to appease an angry God by the sacrifice of himself. But he had no personal knowledge of the One he was serving. This he could only find in Christ, and as yet Luther had not come to know Him. "For I did not believe in Christ: I regarded Him only as a severe and terrible judge, portrayed as seated on a rainbow. Therefore I cast about for other intercessors, Mary and various other saints, also my own works and the merits of my order. . . . Nevertheless this was heresy and idolatry, since I did not know Christ and did not seek in and through Him what I wanted."⁴ And again: "In the monastery I lost my soul's welfare and salvation and my body's health, while I imagined that I knew God the Father intimately, and that it was God's will that I keep the monastic rule and obey the abbot. This, I assumed, would please God and was a knowledge of the Father and of the Father's will."⁵ But since Luther had no knowledge of Christ, he could not possibly be in conscious communion with God, for no one comes to the Father but by the Son. Luther was to learn and confess that "God has ordained that He would not communicate with man through any other medium than Christ alone".⁶

Yet before he gained deliverance, Luther went through untold agonies not only of physical mortification but also of mental uncertainty. He piled confession on confession, penance on penance, denial on denial. It was all to no avail. When he had done all, he knew himself to be an unprofitable servant. He would chastise himself with the fear of insufficiency: "You did not do that properly. You were not contrite enough. You left this out of your confession." "The more I tried to remedy an uncertain, weak, and afflicted conscience with the traditions of men, the more each day I found it more uncertain, weaker, and more troubled."⁷ So he stepped up the frequency and intensity of his self-discipline, yet still without achieving ease. "The more I sweated it out like this, the less peace and tranquillity I knew."⁸ After a welter of flagellation, he would find himself asking: "Who knows whether such things are pleasing to God?"⁹

¹ LW. 24. 23-24.

⁴ LW. 24. 24.

⁷ WA. 40. ii. 15.

² WA. 40. ii. 574.

⁵ WA. 33. 561.

⁸ WA. 44. 819.

³ *Ibid.*, 453.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹ WA. 40. ii. 414.

Commenting later on Galatians 5:17, which epitomized the struggle in his soul, Luther reminisced: "When I was a monk, I used to think that my salvation was undone when I felt any desires of the flesh, that is any malice or sexual desire or anger or envy against any of my brothers. I tried many methods. I made confession every day, etc. But none of this did any good, because the desires of the flesh kept coming back. Therefore I could not find peace, but I was constantly crucified by such thoughts as these: 'You have committed this or that sin; you are guilty of envy, impatience, etc. Therefore it was useless for you to enter this holy order, and all your good works are to no avail.'"¹

It is fashionable nowadays to dismiss all this as the outcome of a too tender conscience. Luther is classified as a scrupulant. It is said that undue perfectionism is "one of the occupational diseases of the religious."² Certainly it was on this score that Luther's spiritual advisers in the priory eventually lost patience with him, although Staupitz never abandoned him.³ But even allowing for such a factor, Luther's malaise cannot be diagnosed only in this way. There was an underlying reason for his distress. Although, to quote McDonough, "he worked, worked, worked to do *quod in se est*," he still did not feel in his heart the perfect love of God which was demanded of him by the ascetic ideal, nor did he find deliverance from his bondage.⁴ In his own words: "though I lived as a monk beyond reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God, with an extremely disturbed conscience. . . ."⁵ It was not that his disturbed conscience made him a sinner: it was rather that because he was a sinner his conscience was disturbed.

It must not be forgotten that all this time Luther was more and more under the scrutiny of God's Word. We have seen how even before he entered the monastery he had been delving into his postil. On his reception into the community he was presented with his red leather-bound Bible. It was then that he soaked himself in it so thoroughly that he could turn up any text he wanted. It was not to be expected perhaps that, with so much medieval lee-way to make up, he should all at once get to the heart of the saving message. It would seem that the strange work of the law (*opus alienum*) paved the way for the proper work of the gospel (*opus proprium*). The aroma of Christ was a fragrance of death to death before it became a fragrance from life to life (II Cor. 2:16). The depth of self-despair into which Luther was plunged may have been induced to some extent by the reading of the Scriptures, which kill before they quicken.

Those who have looked for a psychological explanation of Luther's vicissitudes as a monk have interpreted his faltering at his first celebration

¹ LW. 27. 73.

² WATR. I. 125. No. 302; WA. 26. 55.

³ McDonough, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁴ Todd, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁵ LW. 34. 336.

of the mass in terms of a father-complex. Hans Luther was present, and afterwards at the festive meal which followed, rather crudely queried his son's call to the priesthood. But it is much more probable that what brought the young celebrant to a temporary halt was an overwhelming sense of his own sinfulness in the sight of a holy God. This, moreover, had been stimulated by the words of Scripture in the Sanctus, which immediately preceded: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts, heaven and earth are full of thy glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest." It was as he reached the prayer beginning: "Therefore, O most merciful Father. . . ." that Luther was so overcome as to be unable to continue for a few moments. He was so stupefied that he might have fled, had he not been under the eye of the prior.¹

Many years later Luther recalled the incident in conversation with his friends. "For when I read the words, 'Thee, therefore, most merciful Father,' etc., and thought I had to speak to God without a Mediator, I felt like fleeing from the world like Judas. Who can bear the majesty of God without Christ as Mediator?"² And on another occasion he gave this account: "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 even of an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine majesty? The angels surround Him. At His nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pigmy, 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, the eternal and the true God.'"³

It is Lortz who draws attention to the fact that it was something from the Word of God which arrested Luther.⁴ Nothing was more typical of the reformer than that he should react like this to a phrase from Scripture, detached as it was from its context. With the hindsight we now possess, it is not difficult to discern the voice of God Himself speaking through His appointed medium of the Word. There is no evidence to indicate that Luther really tried to run away from the altar. The pause was only momentary. But, as Todd remarks, "it remained for Luther a milestone in the building of his own spiritual outlook, his religious life."⁵

Whilst inclining to the view that Luther derived more help than he realized from his study of the Scriptures, we must not depreciate the assistance he received from his superiors. In the end, they felt powerless to speak to his condition, and, with the exception of Staupitz, evidently wrote him off as a hopeless case. But this is not to say that they failed to

¹ LW. 54. 234. No. 3556a; cf. 325. No. 4174.

² Ibid., 234. No. 3556a.

³ WA. 43. 382; cf. LW. 4. 340. Luther linked *Te igitur* with a quotation garbled from the offertory (cf. Fife, op. cit., p. 100 n. 49).

⁴ Lortz, op. cit., Bd. I, p. 161.

⁵ Todd, op. cit., p. 40.

do their best, according to their lights. Several of them Luther remembered with gratitude in later years. There was Johann von Grefenstein, the "fine old man" who had charge of Luther as a novice.¹ There was the prior himself, Winand von Diedenhofen. There was Johann Nathin who superintended Luther's theological studies after his ordination, and referred to his pupil as a "new St. Paul converted by Christ himself".²

But Luther owed most of all to Johann Staupitz, the vicar-general of the order. It was he who held the chair of biblical exegesis at Wittenberg before Luther was appointed to it. Staupitz took a kindly interest in Luther from his first meeting with him and later wrote about his affection as "passing the love of women".³ Luther reciprocated the friendship and cherished a high regard for Staupitz. But it is clear that he was indebted to his preceptor for something more than a tender concern for his welfare. Luther's tribute is crisp but touching. "He bore me to Christ."⁴ That is the most any man can do for another. "If Dr. Staupitz had not helped me out," he confessed, "I should have been swallowed up and left in hell."⁵ And what he admitted to others, Luther did not withhold from Staupitz himself. "I cannot forget or be ungrateful, for it was through you that the light of the gospel began first to shine out of the darkness of my heart."⁶ The core of his counsel was this, as Luther recalled in 1542: "Why do you trouble yourself with these speculations of yours? Accept the wounds of Christ and contemplate the blood which poured forth from His most holy body for our sins - for mine, for yours, for those of all men. 'My sheep hear My voice.'" No wonder Luther referred to him as "my spiritual father in Christ" and "the man who first suggested to me the teachings I now embrace".⁸

These, however, were but men. At most they could put Luther on the right way, as they spoke of Christ and sent him back to the Word. But Luther's struggle for faith would not end until, without any human intermediary, he stood before God to plead no merits of his own but only those of the Redeemer. "I was often frightened by the name of Christ," he confessed, "and when I looked upon Him and the cross, He seemed to me like a flash of lightning. When His name was mentioned, I would rather have heard the devil mentioned, for I believed that I would have

¹ Boehmer, op. cit., p. 40.

² Schwiebert, op. cit., p. 151. Cf. R. Kohlschmidt, "Luther im Kloster der Augustiner-Eremiten zu Erfurt 1505-1511" *Luther, Vierteljahrsschrift*, Bd. XIII (1931), p. 45.

³ Rupp, op. cit., p. 117. On the indebtedness of Luther to his vicar-general *vide* Ernst Wolf, "Staupitz und Luther", *Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte*, Bd. IX (1927).

⁴ *Dok.*, 512.

⁵ *WA.* 58. i. 28.

⁶ *End.* 4. 231; cf. 5. 122.

⁷ *LCC.* 18. 134. Cf. *LW.* 54. 97. No. 526 - "My good Staupitz said, 'One must keep one's eyes fixed on that man who is called Christ.'"

⁸ *LCC.* 18. 189. Cf. *LW.* 54. 97. No. 526 - "Staupitz is the one who started the teaching of the gospel in our time." Boehmer (op. cit., p. 107) contends that Staupitz was nevertheless still very far from the gospel.

to do good works until Christ was made gracious to me through them¹." That was Luther's pitiable state as he sought some solid ground to rest upon and could not find it. But soon he could rejoice in discovery: "Thank God we again have his Word, which pictures and portrays Christ as our righteousness."² It was as he kept at his scanning of the Scriptures that at last the light of hope dawned. For as Boehmer underlines, "from the very beginning his struggle for a gracious God was at the same time a struggle for a right understanding of the Bible"³.

¹ WA. 47. 590.

² Ibid.

³ Boehmer, *op. cit.*, p. 91.