

MARTIN LUTHER'S DATE WITH DESTINY

The Reformation was one of the most momentous turning points in world history. It was led by men of strong faith, deep convictions, great intelligence, high moral standards and tremendous courage. Towering above all these great Reformers, Martin Luther stands out as the most courageous, controversial and influential Reformer of all time.

Facing Certain Death

Summoned to Worms, Luther believed that he was going to his death. He insisted that his co-worker, Philip Melanchthon, remain in Wittenberg. *"My dear brother, if I do not come back, if my enemies put me to death, you will go on teaching and standing fast in the truth; if you live, my death will matter little."* Luther at Worms was 37 years old. He had been excommunicated by the Pope. Luther would have remembered that the Martyr, John Hus, a century before had travelled to Constance with an imperial safe conduct, which was not honoured. Luther declared: *"Though Hus was burned, the truth has not burned, and Christ still lives... I shall go to Worms, though there be as many devils there as tiles on the roofs."*

Luther's journey to Worms was like a victory parade. Crowds lined the roads cheering the man who had dared to stand up for Germany against the Pope.

Before the Emperor

At 4 o' clock on Wednesday 17 April, Luther stood before the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, ruled all the Austrian domains, Spain, Netherlands, a large part of Italy and the Americas. At 21 years old, Charles V ruled over a territory larger than any man since Charlemagne.

Amidst the pomp and splendor of this imperial gathering, stood the throne of the Emperor on a raised platform. It was flanked by Spanish knights in gleaming armour, 6 Princes, 24 Dukes, 30 Archbishops and Bishops, and 7 Ambassadors.

Luther was asked to identify whether the books on the table were his writings. Upon Luther's confirmation that they were, an official asked Luther: *"Do you wish to retract them, or do you adhere to them and continue to assert them?"* Luther had come expecting an opportunity to debate the issues, but it was made clear to him that no debate was to be tolerated. The Imperial Diet was ordering him to recant all his writings. Luther requested

more time, so that he might answer the question without injury to the Word of God and without peril to his soul. The Emperor granted him 24 hours.

Confrontation

The next day, Thursday 18 April, as the sun was setting and torches were being lit, Luther was ushered into the august assembly. He was asked again whether he would recant what he had written. Luther responded that some of his books taught established Christian doctrine on faith and good works. He could not deny accepted Christian doctrines. Other of his books attacked the papacy and to retract these would be to encourage tyranny and cover up evil. In the third category of books, he had responded to individuals who were defending popery and in these Luther admitted he had written too harshly.

The examiner was not satisfied: *"You must give a simple, clear and proper answer... will you recant or not?"*

"Here I Stand"

Luther's response, first given in Latin and then repeated in German, shook the world:

"Unless I am convinced by Scripture or by clear reasoning that I am in error – for popes and councils have often erred and contradicted themselves – I cannot recant, for I am subject to the Scriptures I have quoted; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. It is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against one's conscience. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. So help me God. Amen."

Amidst the shocked silence, cheers rang out for this courageous man who had stood up to the Emperor and the Pope. Luther turned and left the tribunal. Numerous German nobles formed a circle around Luther and escorted him safely back to his lodgings.

Condemned

The Emperor was furious. However, Prince Frederick insisted that Charles V honour the guarantee of safe conduct for Luther. Charles V raged against *"this devil in the habit of a monk"* and issued the edict of Worms, which declared Luther an outlaw, ordering his arrest and death as a *"heretic."*

Kidnapped

As Luther travelled back to Wittenberg, preaching at towns on the route, armed horsemen plunged out of the forest, snatched Luther from his wagon and dragged him off to Wartburg Castle. This kidnapping had been arranged by Prince Frederick amidst great secrecy in order

to preserve Luther's life. Despite the Emperor's decree that anyone helping Luther was subject to the loss of life and property, Frederick risked his throne and life to protect his pastor and professor.

Wartburg Castle

For the 10 months that Luther was hidden at Wartburg Castle, as Knight George (*Junker Jorg*), he translated The New Testament into German and wrote such booklets as: "*On Confession Whether the Pope Has the Authority to Require It; On the Abolition of Private Masses*" and "*Monastic Vows*." By 1522, The New Testament in German was on sale for but a week's wages.

A Time of Change

The Reformation not only brought about sweeping changes in the church, but dramatic changes in all of society. First of all the Reformation focused on bringing doctrines, forms of church government, and of worship and daily life into conformity with the Word of God. But this of course had tremendous implications for political, economical, social and cultural life as well.

God's Word Above All Things

Luther revised the Latin liturgy and translated it into German. Now the laity received the Communion in both bread and wine, as the Husites had taught a century earlier. The whole emphasis in church services changed from the sacramental celebration of the Mass as a sacrifice, to the preaching and teaching of God's Word. Luther maintained that every person has the right and duty to read and study the Bible in his own language. This became the foundation of the Reformation: a careful study of the Bible as the source of all truth and as the only legitimate authority, for all questions of faith and conduct.

The True Church

The Church is a community of believers, not a hierarchy of officials. The Church is an organism rather than an organisation, a living body of which each believer is a member. Luther stressed the priesthood of all believers. We do not gain salvation through the church, but we become members of the Church when we become believers.

Reformation Basic Principles

Luther dealt with many primary issues, including:

1. **Authority** – the Bible alone is our authority and not the councils or leaders of the Church. *The Bible is above tradition.*
2. **Salvation** – is by the grace of God alone, accomplished by the atonement of Christ alone, received by faith alone. *Grace comes before sacraments.*
3. **The Church** – the true Church is composed of the elect, those regenerated by God’s Holy Spirit. *Regenerate Church membership.*
4. **The Priesthood** – consists of all true believers. *The priesthood of all believers.*

The Battle Cries of the Reformation

The Protestant Reformation mobilised by Luther rallied around these great battle cries:

Sola Christus – Christ alone is the Head of the Church.

Sola Scriptura – Scripture alone is our authority.

Sola Gratia – Salvation is by the grace of God alone.

Sola Fide – Justification is received by faith alone.

Soli Deo Gloria – Everything is to be done for the glory of God alone.

Luther’s Legacy

Despite Luther being declared an outlaw by the Emperor, he survived to minister and write for 25 more years, and died of natural causes, 18 February 1546.

In spite of many illnesses, Luther remained very active and productive as an advisor to princes, theologians and pastors, publishing major commentaries, producing great quantities of books and pamphlets, and he completed the translation of The Old Testament into German by 1534. Luther continued preaching and teaching to the end of his life. He frequently entertained students and guests in his home, and he produced beautiful poems and hymns, including one hymn that will live forever: “*Ein Feste Burg Ist Unser Gott*”(A Mighty Fortress Is Our God).

Luther also did a great deal to promote education. He labored tirelessly for establishment of schools everywhere. Luther wrote his *Shorter Catechism* in order to train up children in the essential doctrines of the faith.

It has been common to portray Luther as a simple and obscure monk, who challenged the pope and emperor. Actually, Luther was anything but simple or obscure. He was learned,

experienced and accomplished far beyond most men of his age. He had lived in Magdeburg, Eisenach and was one of the most distinguished graduates of the University of Erfurt. Luther travelled to Cologne, to Leipzig, and had crossed the Alps, and travelled to Rome. Luther was a great student, with a tremendous breadth of reading, who had excelled in his studies, and achieved a Master of Arts and Doctorate in Theology in record time. He was an accomplished bestselling author, one of the greatest preachers of all time, a highly respected theological professor, and one of the first professors to lecture in the German language, instead of in Latin.

Far from being a simple monk, Luther was the Prior of his monastery and the district vicar over 11 other monasteries. Luther was a monk, a priest, a preacher, a professor, a writer, and a Reformer. He was one of most courageous and influential people in all of history. The Lutheran Faith was not only adopted in Northern Germany, but also throughout Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland.

Luther was a controversial figure in his day and has continued to be considered controversial to this very day. There is no doubt that Luther's search for peace with God changed the whole course of human history. He challenged the power of Rome over the Christian Church, smashed the chains of superstition and tyranny and restored the Christian liberty to worship God in spirit and in truth.

"For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes ...For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, the just shall live by faith." Romans 1:16-23

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