A detailed oil painting of Martin Luther, showing his face and upper torso. He has a serious expression, looking slightly to the left. He is wearing a dark, heavy robe. The background is a warm, textured brown.

*How a Monk
Discovered the Gospel*

LUTHER

and the

REFORMATION

R.C. Sproul

Luther and the Reformation

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How a Monk Discovered the Gospel

R.C. SPROUL



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Luther and the Reformation: How a Monk Discovered the Gospel

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From Luther to the Lightning Bolt

Above the modern city of Geneva, Switzerland, stands a section called the Old Town. In the center of the Old Town is a large walking park that features a giant wall of marble called the Reformation Wall. The Reformation Wall features the likenesses of Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, John Calvin, Theodore Beza, John Knox, Martin Bucer, Huldrych Zwingli, and a few others. And chiseled into the stone at the top of the wall are the words *Post tenebras lux*—“After darkness, light.” This became the motto of the sixteenth-century Reformation.

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What was this darkness, this *tenebras*? From the Reformation standpoint, the darkness refers to what had happened to the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages. The church had been experiencing a steady change in its understanding of biblical Christianity, most importantly in its understanding of salvation. What had developed in Rome at this time is what we call *sacerdotalism*—the idea that salvation is accomplished chiefly through the ministrations of the church, through the priesthood, and particularly through the administration of the sacraments. This system of salvation that developed within the Roman Catholic Church came to a crisis with the sixteenth-century Reformation.

But before we examine the historical incidents that provoked this crisis and the people whom God used to bring it to pass, I want to make an important distinction: the Reformers themselves considered their work to be that of reformation, not revolution. They did not see their activities as an organized revolt against the church or against historic Christianity. In many ways, like the eighth- and seventh-century BC

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prophets of Israel, the Reformers saw their task as calling God's people back to their founding. They wanted the church to return to its original forms and to the original theology of the Apostolic church. That is, the Reformers were not trying to create something new.

In 1504, Martin Luther was twenty-one years old. He had completed his master of arts and had enrolled in law school. By age twenty-one, Luther had already distinguished himself with his intelligence. He had been raised in the classical educational system, under which students were required to speak fluent Latin, the language of the university. It was the language of those involved in jurisprudence. It was the language of theologians and of physicians and other professionals. And so Luther's training to become a lawyer served him quite well throughout his lifetime.

To get a sense of where Luther's life fit in Western history, imagine this. He was born in 1483. That means that he was nine years old when Christopher Columbus landed in the New World. The Western world at this time was experiencing all kinds of tumultuous changes.

Luther's father and mother had been peasants in

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Germany near the Thuringian Forest. Hans Luther left the fields of the farm and became a miner. He was so successful in the mining industry of the region that through his managerial and entrepreneurial skills he managed to become an owner of six foundries and elevated the economic station of his family significantly. But his great dream was the education of his son Martin. He would have a son who would be a prominent lawyer, who would become wealthy, and who would be able to care for his parents in their old age. Everything was progressing nicely in this direction in Luther's early years of education. Martin had a reputation for remarkable brilliance in the field of law. Later, his role in the Protestant Reformation greatly benefited from his understanding of law, because he took the skills and the education that he had in jurisprudence and applied it to his study of biblical law.

The crisis that would change Luther's life, and that would change the world forever, took place in July 1505, when Luther was walking home from the university. In the middle of the day, a sudden thunderstorm of great ferocity arose. Suddenly a lightning bolt

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struck the ground just a few feet from where Luther was walking; it was so close to him that it knocked him on the ground. He saw this as a message from God. He was terrified, and he cried out in his fear, “Help me, St. Anne; I will become a monk.”

He made his appeal to St. Anne, the mother of Mary, because she was the patron saint for miners, and she had a prominent place in the daily prayers within the Luther household. So in this moment of crisis, Luther called to heaven for the protection of St. Anne. And true to this vow, he moved to the Augustinian monastery in the city of Erfurt. He chose to enter that particular monastery because it was known as the most rigorous and demanding of the various monastic orders, reflecting the depth of its founder, Augustine of Hippo.

Luther presented himself at the front door of the monastery, was welcomed by the prior, and was asked the question that every novice was asked: “What do you seek?” Luther answered, “God’s grace and your mercy.” And so he was admitted into the order as a novice. At the end of his ordination day, he stood as a

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monk—an occasion filled with more irony than seen in any other moment in church history. The custom for ordination into the priesthood or to the monastic orders was for each man to present himself at the front of the chancel's stairs. He had to prostrate himself on the floor with his arms extended, his body forming the shape of a cross, and he would be garbed in most uncomfortable clothes. In this state of humiliation, the process of ordination would proceed. So where is the irony?

To explain that, I must recall a tour of Luther's Germany I led years ago. We visited all the important cities of Luther's life. We went to the city of his birth, Eisleben, which in the providence of God also became the city of his death. We went to Wittenberg, where he taught at the university and where he posted the Ninety-Five Theses on the Castle Church door. We went to Worms, where the imperial diet was held in 1521. We went to Leipzig, where an important disputation took place. And of course, we visited Erfurt and the site where Luther had been ordained. The year of our tour was a celebration of Luther, and portraits

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of Luther were all over what was then East Germany. Every church building and many billboards featured a portrait of Martin Luther against the background of the silhouette of a swan. I asked why the image of the swan adorned these posters with the portrait of Martin Luther, and I learned that the imagery dated back to events that had taken place in Bohemia in the city of Prague. A noted professor in that area had published works declaring that the Scriptures alone contained the inspired Word of God and could not be equaled by the edicts and teachings of the church. For that and other doctrines he was teaching, he ran into problems with the established church and was put on trial as a heretic. The man's name was Jan Hus. *Hus* in the Czech language means "goose." When Hus would not recant his writings, the presiding bishop sentenced him to be burned at the stake. As Hus was about to be executed, he said to the presiding bishop, "You may burn this goose, but there will come after me a swan, whom you will not be able to silence," and that story became widely known throughout Europe. So when Luther appeared on the scene, he was welcomed as the

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prophetic fulfillment of Jan Hus' idea of the swan who would come.

Here's the irony. When Luther presented himself for ordination at the chancel steps at the Erfurt monastery and lay on the ground with his arms outstretched, he was right in front of the altar, and buried in front of the altar under the stones of the chapel was the bishop who had condemned Jan Hus to death. When Hus said to the bishop, "You may burn this goose, but there will come a swan whom you will not be able to silence," I'd like to think that the bishop said to Hus, "Over my dead body!"

In his early years, Luther tended to have a crisis about every five years. In 1505 came the lightning bolt. It was the lightning bolt that changed the world. He faced another crisis in 1510 when he made a visit to Rome and still a third crisis in 1515 when he understood the gospel for the first time in his life. But first we have to understand what happened to him when he entered the monastery.

Things were not good at home. Father Hans was furious with his son for disappointing him by not

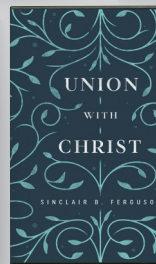
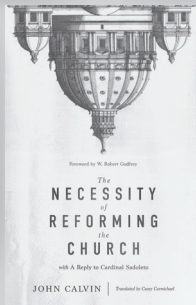
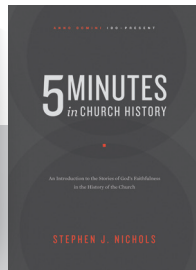
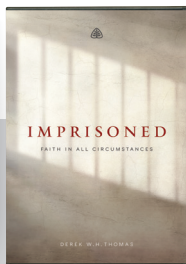
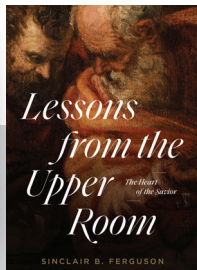
pursuing a career in law. When Luther entered the monastery, he vowed to become the best monk that he could possibly be. Later he would reflect and say, "If anyone was ever going to make it to heaven through monkery, it was I." And so he engaged in the rigorous schedule of the monastic life. Scheduled during the day were several times of prayer, which had an impact on the rest of his life. Luther was a disciplined man of prayer as long as he lived. But not only that, he participated in the practice of the daily confessional. Each monk had a father confessor with whom he had to meet every day as a matter of religious discipline. Luther gave nothing but vexation to his father confessor and the other authorities in the monastery. The other brothers would confess: "Father, I have sinned in the last twenty-four hours. I coveted Brother Jonathan's dinner last night, and I stayed up five minutes past lights-out." They would confess their sins in five minutes, get their absolution, and then go back to their tasks in the monastery. But Brother Luther would come and confess his sins of the last twenty-four hours for twenty minutes, half an hour, an hour, and sometimes two or three hours, until the

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confessor became exasperated with him. The confessor would say: “Brother Martin, don’t come to me with these minor infractions. If you are going to sin, give me something worth forgiving.”

But Luther’s mind worked this way. He was a student of the law. He pored over the law meticulously. He realized, for example, that the Great Commandment was to love the Lord his God with all his might and all his soul and all his strength and to love his neighbor as much as he loved himself, and he knew that he hadn’t obeyed this commandment for a single hour. As he applied the fullness of the depths of God’s law to his own life, all he could see was guilt. He was driven by a passion to experience forgiveness that was real and lasting, but this passion was never fulfilled in the monastery.

We want to see men and women
around the world connect the deep truths
of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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