

## **CHAPTER II**

### **MARTIN LUTHER'S FORMATIVE YEARS**

#### **1. Luther's Birth and Baptism**

It was about eleven o'clock on the night of November 10, 1483, and while most of the people in the little town of Eisleben, Germany, were sound asleep, there was a light burning in the home of the mine worker, Hans Luther. Margaret Luther, his wife, was about to give birth to her first-born child. Slowly the moments passed, but just before the midnight hour, the blessed event occurred, and a baby boy was born into this world. According to the prevailing custom, they presented their child for baptism the next day at the Church of St. Peter, and since November 11 was known as St. Martin's Day (St. Martin of Tours), the child was given the name of this particular saint. He was known as Martin Luther, the man who was destined to become the leader of the Protestant Reformation.

#### **2. Luther's Childhood**

When Martin was a few months old, his family moved to the nearby city of Mansfeld, and here Martin spent his childhood. His father was a strong disciplinarian, and evidently believed the proverb, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." If the use of the rod prevents children from being spoiled, Luther was in no danger of being spoiled, because his father frequently resorted to whipping his son, and his mother was also quite proficient at the art. Nevertheless, the Luthers were religious people, and they taught their son the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the "Ave Maria." At the age of seven, young Martin started to attend the Latin school in Mansfield, attending school here until he was fourteen. Here he received the rudiments of an education, but the discipline was most severe. One morning Luther was flogged no less than fifteen times because he could not recite certain declensions and conjugations which he said had not even been assigned.

#### **3. Luther's Secondary Education**

At the age of fourteen, Martin Luther entered a school administered by a group known as "The Brethren of the Common Life." This school was located in the city of Magdeburg. Health issues, however, caused him to leave this school about a year later, but it seems that the personal piety of these "Brethren of the Common Life" made a deep impression on young Luther. A little later, Luther entered school at Eisenach and here he helped pay for his education by going out with groups of students and singing in front of the houses of the wealthier citizens of the town, in hope that these citizens would give a donation. It was here that a certain wealthy lady by the name of Frau Cotta grew to like young Luther and often invited him into her home; she became a sort of second mother to him. Some Lutheran ladies' societies in future generations were called "Cotta Societies," and some Lutheran hospices were called "Cotta Hall" in remembrance of this kind lady.

#### **4. Luther's University Training**

Hans Luther, though a peasant miner, had high hopes for his son Martin, and desired that he should become a lawyer. Thus in 1501 Luther entered the University of Erfurt, where he became a good student. He received the Ph.B. degree in 1502, ranked thirteenth out of a class of 57. In 1505 he received a Master's Degree, this time ranking second in a class of 17. However, Luther never became a lawyer.

#### **5. The Reality of Sin**

Though not an exceptionally ill-behaved boy, early in life Luther developed a deep consciousness of his own sins and shortcomings. He continually dwelt on the fact that God demands perfect works, and he had nothing but imperfect ones to offer him. He developed a terrible fear of death, because death would put him into the hands of an offended God. The terrors of death seemed especially real to him when once on a visit to his parents, he accidentally severed an artery in his foot and nearly bled to death. Again he was terrified when one of his friends was found dead in bed, and this friend died without the last anointing, otherwise known as the Sacrament of Extreme Unction. Some time later, Luther was caught in a thunderstorm, and he interpreted each clap of thunder as the voice of God pouring down his wrath upon him, the sinner. In a vow which none but God heard, he vowed to Saint Anne (mother of the virgin Mary, the patron saint of miners) to enter the monastery, where he hoped by this higher type of religious life to win the favor of an offended God.

#### **6. Luther Enters the Monastery**

After a pleasant evening with his friends at the University of Erfurt, he announced to them that he intended to become a monk. The next morning found him knocking at the gate of a local Augustinian monastery. He took his vow seriously and willingly did all that was required of him, but still he did not find that peace which he was seeking. In 1507 he was ordained to the priesthood and was permitted to conduct his first mass. He had hoped that as he sang those holy words of institution, and, as he then supposed, performed the miracle of changing the bread and wine into the body and blood of our Lord, he would find peace with God, but he was disappointed. He could see Christ only as the Righteous Judge. He said; "When I looked upon him on the cross, he appeared to me as lightning. When his name was mentioned, I had rather the devil were mentioned; I was terrified when I saw his likeness, dropped my eyes, and would rather have seen the devil."

#### **7. Luther to Rome**

A fellow monk at Erfurt reminded Luther that in the Creed we "believe in the forgiveness of sins," and Dr. Staupitz (see Appendix F), his superior, directed him to "the wounds of Christ." While these suggestions were helpful, the full light did not yet begin to shine within his soul. The journey to Rome in 1511 on business for his order brought no peace; though when he first approached the city he fell upon his knees and cried, "Hail, holy Rome!" he later exclaimed, "If there is a hell, Rome is built upon it, for there do all sins flourish."

## **8. Professor of Theology**

In 1502, the Elector of Saxony had established a university at Wittenberg, and this Dr. Staupitz had become the dean of the department of theology. At the suggestion of Staupitz, Luther was called to this university in 1508 as professor of philosophy. In 1509, he was made Bachelor of Divinity, and in 1512, Doctor of Divinity, and was assigned the chair of Scripture Interpretation in the Divinity School of Wittenberg University. Thus he was led, yes even forced, to study the Bible, and through the study of the Scriptures he found that long sought peace with God.

## **9. Justification by Faith**

The passage which especially brought light upon his problem was Romans 1:17; “The just shall live by faith.” Luther began to realize that nothing a person can do or hope to do will ever win the favor of God or make up for past sin, but that Jesus Christ lived that perfect life which sinful man was unable to live, that he suffered that which sinful man deserved to suffer, and if the sinner will but cling to Christ in faith, he will be justified. God will see not the sinner’s imperfect righteousness, but the perfect righteousness of Christ, and there will be no punishment for sin because the sufferings of Christ have made complete atonement.

A Lutheran Catechism defines “justification” as follows: “Justification is that act of God, by which he, of pure grace, for the sake of the merits of Christ, pronounces a poor sinner, who truly believes in Christ, free from guilt, and declares him just.” A fine statement of this central truth! When Luther discovered its full implications, he found peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus on the basis of Scripture in the heart of Martin Luther, the Reformation was born.

### **FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. What theories of child training prevailed in Luther’s day?
2. Who were the “Brethren on the Common Life,” and what contribution did they make towards Luther’s education?
3. Why has the name “Cotta” been popular in Lutheran circles?

