

SOLA FIDE - ROMANS 1:17

LIFE VERSE OF MARTIN LUTHER

Marty was in good spirits as he walked that dirt road towards the Saxon village of Stotternheim. He felt like a young boy holding a kite flying high in the air - he had life on a string. He was finishing his M.A. degree with honors from the University of Erfurt. At the age of just 21, this was quite an accomplishment. He was well on the way to a distinguished career as a lawyer. Life just couldn't have been better. But little did he know of the major changes that were to occur in the direction of his life that very afternoon.

The mugginess of that July day caused dark clouds to gather overhead. Marty quickened his step in hopes to get back to shelter before the inevitable rains began to fall. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning struck the ground ahead of him. The force of the lightening knocked Marty right off of his feet, flattening him on the ground.

The deafening roar of the thunder temporarily shut down his hearing. Marty was convinced that this was

the end - he was going to die. In a state of panic and fear, he cried out to the only one he thought could help - his family's patron saint. *St. Anne, please help me! If you spare my life, I will become a monk.*

Suddenly everything was quiet. All that Marty could feel was the beating of his heart and all that he could hear were the gasps of air that he was breathing. He staggered back to his feet and began to run towards his destination. He didn't even feel the rain as it was now pelting down upon him. With a single mindedness, Marty ran to his house and closed the door behind him. He was still alive. Ironically, the man who had called out to his patron saint for help in his moment of greatest need would one day deny the validity of saint intercession. But that is how the spiritual pilgrimage of Martin Luther began.

It is impossible to overstate the influence that Martin Luther has had on the world today. The historian

Carlyle devotes an entire chapter to his influence systematically showing that every nation has prospered or floundered depending on the attitude that it has taken towards the teachings of Martin Luther. Although there were many other key players, Luther is the name most often associated with the Protestant Reformation movement. So it is most appropriate for us to look this morning at the verse that influenced Martin Luther the most in his life - Luther's life verse.

It is found in Romans 1:17: *For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: the righteous will live by faith.*

Let's read the context of this verse together for our Scripture Reading this morning. We will begin with verse 8 and read through verse 17. Verse 8 immediately follows the customary greeting that the Apostle Paul generally placed at the beginning of his epistles.

READ Romans 1:8-17:

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times;

and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.

That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

Now as I mentioned before, that last verse that we read was the one that opened Martin Luther's eyes to the truth of God's way of salvation for human beings.

For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

The spiritual pilgrimage of Martin Luther moving from fear to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ took several steps.

1. True to his promise, Luther entered the Augustinian Order as a Monk. He chose this specific

order because it was the strictest one he knew. And in many ways, Luther's upbringing had prepared him for the rigors of monastic life.

Martin Luther had been raised in a very strict environment - we probably would call it abusive today. He speaks of his mother beating him with a cane until the blood flowed for stealing a nut one time. On another occasion he speaks of being caned 15 times in one morning at school for failing to conjugate his Latin lesson correctly.

So the life of a monk was not a shock for Martin Luther for he was used to a rigid and disciplined life. And, in many ways, it was his upbringing that instilled within him the strong fear of God that he had. But life in the monastery did not bring the inner peace that Luther so strongly craved. The inner spiritual void continued. So thinking that perhaps he was not stringent enough in his spiritual disciplines, Martin Luther now

entered a period of asceticism in his life.

2. Asceticism is the belief that the physical body is evil and bad - the source of most of our problems. This belief originally comes from a Platonic view of life. Plato the ancient Greek philosopher had taught his students that the soul in every human being was good emanating from God, but the body was bad, the source of all evil. When the soul was united with the body, there was continuous warfare that would only be ended by death, when the soul could leave the body and return once again to the good, God. The early church was thrust into a culture that was dominated by Plato's ideas.

So it is not surprising that very early in the history of the church, groups of people tried to combine elements of Christianity with the concepts of Plato. Out of this attempt came those who tried to become more holy through an extremely ascetic lifestyle. By beating down the body, they felt that they could hinder the evil within

and become progressively more and more holy. Many of the monastic orders emphasized this type of thinking - and some continue to this day. In his own journal, Luther confessed: *I was indeed a pious monk and kept the rules of my order so strictly that I can say if every a monk gained Heaven through monkery, it should have been I. All my monastic brethren who knew me will testify to this. I would have martyred myself to death with fasting, praying, reading and other good works had I remained a monk much longer.*

History records his attempts to purify his body through self affliction. He fasted for weeks on end. He would often choose to sleep on his knees denying himself the comfort of lying down. Even in the middle of the winter, he would often sleep without any blankets, nearly freezing to death. It was not uncommon for his fellow monks to find Martin passed out in his cell from some self-inflicted abuse. Later in his life, he would

acknowledge permanent damage done to his body and digestive system because of this period of severe austerity. But Martin Luther still found no peace within. His soul remained restless.

3. Having found no peace in his monastic vows or asceticism, Martin Luther now embarked upon an attempt to accumulate enough goodness to compensate for the spiritual failures in his life that he was all too aware of. While the Roman Church had an individualistic view of sin, it stressed a corporate view of goodness. God's grace, it claimed, could be pooled and distributed through the church to its members. One of the major means of doing this was through the relics of the saints. The relics were holy articles that were claimed to be special means of grace. Most of the important ones were kept in Rome, although every major church had some if possible. When a person made a pilgrimage and paid homage to the relics, large

quantities of grace were received. In fact, it was believed that one could receive even more merit from St. Peter's Cathedral and the Lateran than from a trip to the Holy Land in Luther's day.

So in November of 1510. Martin Luther made a pilgrimage to Rome. In his own words, *In Rome, I was a frantic saint. I ran through all the churches and catacombs . . . trying to obtain as much grace as possible.*

Now we look back on these relics with mild amusement today, but we must remember that the world of Luther's day was very superstitious. He lived during the closing years of the Middle Ages. But even he found these proposed relics hard to believe. It was as he was climbing the long staircase of Pilate that had supposedly been miraculously transported to Rome from Jerusalem on his knees, praying at every step, that he was overcome by doubts. Salvation

certainly cannot come to humans in this way.

Upon his return to his home, Luther continued his soul searching. He went for a period of his life where he spent an average of 6 hours every day in a confession booth, trying to find some spiritual relief. But he found none - and the spiritual void continued in his heart. There was no peace within.

4. One of his mentors convinced Martin Luther that he was trying too hard to please God. The mystical approach was the one to take. Working to achieve merit was a form of asserting oneself against God. What he must do is yield and just sink into God - become one with God. There was a set procedure that had been developed for this mysticism and Luther learned it eagerly. It involved meditation and produced visions. But after the emotional highs left, the spiritual depression would sink back in, often worse than ever. So much so that Martin Luther

began to despair of life itself.

5. It was at this lowest point in his life that God brought all of this spiritual preparation together in the life of Martin Luther and opened his spiritual eyes. Listen to his own testimony of his conversion: *I had already returned to interpret the Psalms anew. I was confident of the fact that I was more skillful after I had lectured at the University on St. Paul's epistles to the Romans, Galatians and the one to the Hebrews. I had indeed been captivated to understand Paul's epistle to the Romans. But up until then, it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Romans 1:17 that stood in my way - in it the righteousness of God is revealed. For I hated that phrase, righteousness of God, which according to the use and custom of all my teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically as God's formal or active righteousness with which God is righteous and*

punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though I had lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that God was satisfied with my actions. I did not love but rather hated that righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God and said, As if indeed it is not enough that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of evil and by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also the gospel threatening us with His righteousness and wrath. Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I persistently studied Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what he meant.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely,

In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, He who through faith is righteous shall live. There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely a passive righteousness with which a merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, He who through faith is righteous shall live. Here I felt that I was altogether born again, and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon, I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms a like analogy: the work of God, that is what God does in us; the power of God, with which He makes us strong; the wisdom of God, with which He makes us wise; the salvation of God whereby he saves us. And I began to extol the sweetest word with a love

as great as the hatred with which I had before hated that phrase the righteousness of God.

Now we hear and take for granted the truth that Martin Luther saw so plainly for the first time so it might be difficult for us to fully empathize with the relief that must have been his. But in his day, the righteousness of God only had one meaning. Whenever one spoke of the righteousness of God, he was speaking of God's attributes, God's perfect character, God's holiness, God's intolerance of sin. But when Paul spoke of the righteousness of God in Romans 1:17, he was speaking of a gift that God offered to man. That is the reason for our translations today rendering this phrase *a righteousness from God*. For all of the years that Martin Luther had studied and taught this book to University students, he had never before seen the righteousness of God as a gift that God offered to man through faith. He had been convinced

that the righteousness of God was something that God was and that we as human beings had to attain our own righteousness through our own merits and works.

There was the righteousness of God and there was the righteousness of man. And man would be able to enter heaven if and when his righteousness measured up to the standard that God had set.

No wonder Martin Luther spent the entirety of his life before his conversion as a miserable failure. You talk about an unrealistic and unattainable goal. The best that can be said for his attempts is that he was totally sincere. But it was a hopeless endeavor from the start - and it would inevitably lead to a hatred to God. And why not hate a God who would set up such an unattainable system and then sit back and watch person after person fail. Luther's God had been like a father who is playing basketball with his 5 year old son and keeps demanding that he shoot the heavy

basketball through the 10 foot hoop as the dad does. The son, of course, can't do it. But the father keeps scolding and punishing the son every time he shoots the ball up short of the hoop. Luther's God was one who surely was absolutely perfect in his own character and standards. But he was a God who demanded that same perfection out of sinful creatures who didn't have the ability to meet those perfect standards.

But Martin Luther came to realize that he had been seeking the wrong God – that his view of God was wrong. The true and living God of the Bible is not a God who demands that people achieve that which is unattainable. The God of the Bible is not a God who lines his creatures up and commands them to jump across the Grand Canyon watching with glee as one after another falls into the abyss. The God of the Bible is a God who makes available to people that which is needed to satisfy the perfection of His

character. The Righteousness of God sometimes refers to God's perfect character in the Bible. But it is also used to speak of the gift that God gives to man, God's own imputed righteousness by which he justifies the sinner, makes the one who was born in sin to become holy and righteous in his sight. And this is obviously Paul's usage in Romans 1:17. He has just spoken of his confidence in the gospel, the good news, of the Lord Jesus Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation. He then speaks of the righteousness of God that is by faith. . for God's righteous one does not live by works or merits or relics or prayers to saints or abuse of the body, but God's righteous one lives by faith. And out of this insight would come one of the great watchwords of the Reformation - Sola Fide: faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to obtain the righteousness of God.

The glorious truth of the Bible is that humans can

do nothing to earn their way to heaven. Why is this such a glorious truth, you might ask? It certainly is not flattering to us. But it remains a glorious truth because it is liberating, it produces a freedom that cannot be gained in any other way. Jesus said, *You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.* Martin Luther spent his entire childhood and young manhood until he was 30 years old in bondage. He knew that he wasn't saved, he had no peace within. But he was convinced in his mind that if he only found the right method, he could save himself. So he entered a monastery, he abused his body, he prayed, he confessed sins, he sought mystical experiences - but he remained a slave in bondage. It was only as he saw the righteousness of God as a gift which God offers to man that he was finally set free. And what a change took place in his life, and through his life in the world.

We would think that this glorious, freeing

spiritual insight of Martin Luther would have been hailed and accepted by everyone in his day, but such was not the case. The eyes of many were certainly opened to the truth of God's word as revival spread across Germany and Europe. But this new emphasis upon the Scriptures and the gospel was a threat to many of the established church leaders whose positions of power depended upon keeping people in spiritual bondage. So it was inevitable that the reformer would face criticism and opposition. The opposition to Luther climaxed as he was subpoenaed to appear before a religious court in the city of Worms. In these days in Europe, a person could be tried by a religious court and condemned to be thrown out of the established church. The decision had already been made in secret. Luther and his views just could not be tolerated within the Roman Church for they undermined the whole system of God dispensing

his grace through the church sacraments. But Luther must be confronted publicly in a court setting. On that April day in 1521, his many books were stacked up before him and he was asked to defend them. One by one, he showed how the general teachings contained in his writings corresponded to the clear teachings from the Word of God.

Finally, the statement was made that his writings contradict the traditional teachings of the Roman church and he was asked to recant his teachings or suffer the consequences. Martin Luther knew firsthand what those consequences might be. At the least, he would be excommunicated. All of his worldly security would be cut out from under his feet. But very probably, he would suffer a worse fate. He would likely be hunted down and persecuted. Probably, he would not die a natural death, but suffer one of intense pain and suffering as a martyr. So his

answer was critical, for it would determine the course of the remainder of his life.

Martin Luther stood slowly to his feet, looked into the eyes of the judge, and answered: *Unless I am convinced by the Scriptures and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.*

*I am sure that Martin Luther had no idea of the impact that his stand would make on his country and the world. I am sure that he had no idea that one day a Christian denomination would bear his name. He was just a man who had labored through a painful spiritual pilgrimage to see the light of God's grace. He was a man who had personally realized the spiritual freedom

that can come only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And once having tasted the righteousness of God that had been imputed to him as he believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, he wasn't going to go back - no matter what the cost.

Do you know the same spiritual freedom in your life that Martin Luther found in his? You do if you have found the righteousness of God that comes only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?