

The Discovery of the Gospel

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October 1997

Presented to the Lutheran Church of Kazakstan
Reformation Lecture Series
Lecture II

God uses the humble of the world to accomplish great things for him. It was no accident that our Lord Jesus Christ Himself was born into a carpenter's family and grew up in the humble little town of Nazareth. God has often taken ordinary people and led them to do extraordinary things for the Kingdom of God. Dr. Martin Luther was no exception.

Martin was born to a peasant family, Hans and Margareta Luther, in Eisleben, Germany, on November 10, 1483. His father Hans had come to Eisleben looking for work in the mines. Immediately on the next day, the baby was baptized. Since it was the Feast of St. Martin, the boy was named in honor. Less than a year later the family moved to Mansfeld, another small town. There his father eventually founded a copper business and later became a member of the city council. Martin grew up in a family that wanted great things for their children. The family sacrificed to get ahead.

It was a tough time in the German towns. There was a lot of street violence, homelessness, and sickness. Grievances were often settled with fists or knives. Oftentimes the authorities were not able to control the violence. Security of any sort was difficult to maintain.

Hans and Margareta were strict. Yet Hans did not bring his son into his copper business. He wanted his son Martin to be educated. Martin attended the school in Mansfeld. There the primary subject was Latin, the language of the educated. Pedagogy was far different from modern methods. The children were ridiculed and coerced into learning. Children were beaten if they were not successful or if they were caught speaking German.

The family was also pious and religious. Like many in that day, they were terrified of the judgment to come. Christ was often pictured sitting on his throne. People were concerned how they could know that God would be merciful to them. They believed what they were told. "Do what is in your power," the church proclaimed. Then, through the power of the church and its sacraments, God would add his grace and smile. Luther was impressed by a prince who renounced his nobility and became a monk, spending his life as a beggar. Luther commented, "He had fasted so often, kept so many vigils, and so mortified his flesh that he was the picture of death, just skin and bones."

People went to confession regularly, where they would tell of their sins and hear from the priest what they needed to do to make things right. The church also taught them that they had to purged of all the sins they had failed to confess and work off as well. If they did not do so here on earth, they would surely pay the price in purgatory, where they would have to settle all the sins they had not taken care of here before they could be admitted into heaven. Something called an indulgence was created. In fact, it was one of the first things to be printed on the newly invented printing press. An indulgence was exchanged for a gift to the church and released the donor or someone the donor named from the fires of purgatory for a specific period of time. The donor's name and the time bought were filled in blanks on the form.

Luther went on to study for a year at Magdeburg and studied for three years at Eisenach. These schools were not as strict nor as rigid as at Mansfeld. Luther had an opportunity to sing and to earn some money for his singing. His teachers recognized Luther's ability and success in school. They encouraged him to attend a university. His father, still ambitious for his son and hoping his son could ultimately find a career in law, was able to send Luther to the University of Erfurt in 1501. Luther excelled at the university. He completed his Bachelor's degree in the minimum time of one year. By January 1505 he passed the examination for his Master's degree. For graduation his father gave him a very expensive set of the best law books of the day. There was no doubt that Hans wanted his son to become a lawyer.

As a university student, Luther learned to think and to debate. Instruction was largely Aristotelian. Truths were considered to be universal and logically consistent with one another. Contradictions were to be resolved through logic. Disputations, formal debates, were often held and were open to argument on almost any topic. Faculty and students alike participated in these disputations. At Erfurt, Luther learned to ask questions, to pose them carefully, and to seek answers until they came.

It appears that Luther soon began asking questions about himself, about his future, about his life, and about eternity. Only a few months earlier at Easter in 1504 Luther accidentally wounded himself with his sword. He almost bled to death before he could medical attention, and the wound bled again that night. In fear, Luther reported that he prayer to the Virgin Mary for help. He did not yet understand the love and grace of God. Luther had lots of time to think between the awarding of his Master's degree in January and the start of his lecturing at the university in April and his planned beginning of the study of law in May. At the age of 21 he most likely began to wonder if the plans he had made for his life were right. One of his friends died very suddenly. This shocked Luther deeply. He wondered what would have happened to him had he been the friend to die. Luther was troubled and asked questions. In July he took an official leave of absence from the university and went home to Mansfeld to discuss things with his family. One can only guess at what they talked about, but it is clear that Luther's father wanted him to become a lawyer. Luther was not sure. On the way back to Erfurt there was a thunderstorm. A nearby lightning bolt frightened Luther so much that he thought his end

was near. In fear, he prayed to St. Anne, the favorite saint of the miners, "Help me, and I will become a monk." Luther did not die, and he knew that he had made a vow.

Luther now had a decision to make. Luther apparently consulted his friends about his vow and sought their advice. After finally making up his own mind, he held a farewell party for his friends. He gave away everything he owned, including his lute and his expensive law books. There were many monasteries in Erfurt. He chose the Augustinians who resided in the Black Cloister in Erfurt. The Augustinians had sufficient funds from gifts so that most of the monks could spend time in prayer, meditation, and the important business of earning spiritual benefits for themselves and others. Though the monks did some begging outside the walls of the monastery for purposes of discipline, Luther spent most of his time learning the new routine of worship, prayer, and meditation.

His father was very angry when he heard of Luther's action. He almost disowned his son. His father is said to have responded, "God grant that you may not have taken for a sign from heaven what was merely a delusion of the devil."

In 1507 Luther celebrated his first Mass. His father came for the event and apparently had softened a little, as he brought a gift for the monastery. But at a celebration afterward, his father indicated that he still was disappointed. Luther said to his father, "Isn't this better for you than my being a lawyer?" His father's reply would never be forgotten, "Have you not heard the commandment to honor your father and mother?"

As a monk and priest, Luther chose for himself an extremely rigorous path. He earnestly pursued prayer, fasting, depriving himself of sleep and warmth, even beating himself. In doing this Luther was seeking to love God with all that he had. Luther began to study the Scriptures, the Latin Bible, chained to the wall in the monastery library because of its value. But as he studied the Scriptures, he discovered how far short of perfection his life fell. He could find no peace, for he realized all the more that he was a sinner, hopeless in the eyes of God.

Of all the things that monks did, Luther most feared going to confession. It was a daily ritual in the monastery. The monks sought to pure themselves of their sins almost as quickly as they committed them. Confession and the acts of penance that followed were absolutely essential to monastery life. But confession was different for the monks than it was for ordinary Christians. Ordinary Christians were asked to list their sins. When the monks went to confession, their motives, emotions, thoughts, and feelings were also examined. Luther was horrified over this daily confession. For he could never remember everything. Then, later, some thought or emotion that was wrong would come to his mind. He was afraid that the whole wrath of God would be unleashed against him for this unconfessed issue. Luther experienced lengthy periods of doubt that almost convinced him that God did not love him. He was convinced that he was too sinful for the grace of God to do him any good. His superior, Johann Staupitz, tried to help Luther.

Staupitz told Luther, “God is not angry with you, but you are angry with God.” He tried to point Luther to cross of Jesus. “Throw yourself into the Redeemer’s arms,” he told Luther.

In the winter of 1508, Luther was sent to Wittenberg to lecture on philosophy. There, he also began to preach in the chapel of Augustinian cloister. Luther’s preaching attracted attention, for it appears that already then his preaching was Biblical. After a few months, however, Luther was transferred back to Erfurt.

Back in Erfurt Luther found himself caught up in a monastic argument. The Augustinian monasteries were under an order to consolidate under one central administration. The Black Cloister resisted the movement, fearing it was an attempt to get at their wealth. The dissenting monasteries appealed the issue to Rome, and Luther was one of two monks chosen to go to Rome to present their arguments. Luther and his companion lost their case, but Luther was both impressed with what he saw and saddened by the open immorality of the Romans. He wanted to see all the churches and all the holy sites. He was able to say a brief Mass at one of the especially sacred chapels. Luther believed there were spiritual benefits to all of this. He said later, “I almost wished that my parents were no longer living, for I was certain that in Rome I could pray them out of purgatory.” But he was not impressed by the wickedness he saw both in the city and among the priests and church officials.

After returning to Erfurt, his brothers in the Black Cloister were not willing to accept the decision of Rome to unify. But Luther and another monk considered the matter settled and were willing to submit. His brothers were furious. The head of the order in Germany was Luther’s old confessor, Johann Staupitz, now at Wittenberg. Almost like going into exile, his brothers forced Luther and his friend to leave to join Staupitz. Off to Wittenberg they went.

But something else had been happening, too. Luther had been studying theology, first while lecturing temporarily at Wittenberg, then at Erfurt before and after his trip to Rome, and finally again at Wittenberg. His mentor Staupitz finally told Luther that it was necessary for him to become a professor of theology at Wittenberg and preacher at the Castle Church there. Luther protested, but Staupitz was firm. Finally in October 1512 Luther was awarded his doctorate of theology. He took an oath on the Bible to teach only true doctrine and to report all who promoted falsehood. He began his teaching only a few days later. His doctorate had been financed by the Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony, who was expanding Wittenberg. His condition was that Martin become a professor of the Bible at his university there for life.

During all this time, Luther was still undergoing spiritual troubles. Luther came to Staupitz again and again to share his struggles, his doubts, and often his outright hatred of a righteous God who demanded perfection from sinful people. Luther stated, “I hoped I might find peace of conscience with fasts, prayer, and the vigils with which I miserably afflicted my body, but the more I sweated it out like this, the less peace and tranquillity I

knew.” At one point Staupitz actually commanded Luther to go out and commit real sin. “Pay attention. You want to be without sin, but you don’t have any real sins anyway. Christ is the forgiveness of awful sins, like the murder of one’s parents, public vices, blasphemy, adultery, and the like. These are real sins. . . . You must not inflate your halting, artificial sins out of proportion.” Luther’s struggles were continuing.

Between 1512 and 1517 Luther’s life was that of a professor. As he worked studying the Scriptures and preparing his lectures, his theology began to develop and grow. Luther commented, “I did not learn my theology all at once, but had to search deeper for it, where my temptations took me.” His first lectures were on Genesis. Then followed lectures on the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, Hebrews, and once again the Psalms.

Luther was preoccupied with the problem of the righteousness of God. As a monk he had been taught that the righteousness of God meant that God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. This made Luther angry with God and even hate this righteous God. “As if indeed it is not enough that miserable sinners, eternally lost through eternal sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Ten Commandments, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and by the gospel’s threatening us with his righteousness and wrath.” Luther’s compulsion was to discover how a Christian could live with a righteous God whom he could never possibly satisfy. Luther studied Paul’s statement that the righteous live by faith, but all Luther could see at this early stage was that he had to be righteous in order to receive faith. He knew that God was righteous that he, Martin, was not.

As Luther continued to study and to teach, something started to happen. He was not content just to repeat what he had been taught to his students. He searched commentaries, began to study the text of Scripture in the original Hebrew and Greek, and considered what the church fathers had said. As a result, Luther began to see that there was another way to understand the righteousness of God. There is a glimpse of this revolutionary, new understanding in Luther’s lecture on Psalm 72. “This is what is called the judgment of God: like the righteousness or strength or wisdom of God, it is that with which we are wise, just, and humble, or by which we are judged.” Something is changing in Luther’s thought. There is a second meaning to the righteousness of God. Luther discovered that it is a quality God gives to believers and by which God makes them acceptable in God’s presence. God’s righteousness is not just a perfect God demanding perfection of imperfect sinners. It is God giving sinners that which they cannot do themselves. In 1514 Luther explained to his students: “Whoever wants to understand . . . the Scriptures wisely needs to understand all these things as they apply to the conduct of life: truth, wisdom, salvation, justice, namely the things with which he makes us strong, saved, just, wise. So it is with the works of God and the way of God, all of which things Christ is in the literal sense, and in terms of the conduct of life all these things are faith in him.”

If Luther was right, then a lot of the church's practice and teaching of the late Middle Ages was wrong. The church left this issue of the righteousness of God unresolved for people. They were to do their best and trust in God's grace to complete their works. But this is what led to Luther's uncertainty, fear, and even anger. If God's righteousness was basically something God gave away, and if the act of giving it away was His mercy, then there was no reason for Christians to try to be righteous in His presence on their own account or even "to do what is in them" as preparation for receiving sacramental grace. As Luther resolved the central problem of God's righteousness, this new understanding would lead to a reformation of teaching and practice. Luther didn't understand it all fully at this time, but the fortress of medieval theology and piety was cracking. Luther's change in understanding of the righteousness of God acted like a bit of yeast in a loaf of dough. No longer was God's righteousness seen as only a quality God possessed and with which He judged. God's righteousness was something God gives sinners.

As Luther prepared his lectures on the Book of Romans, his understandings began to broaden. He rejected the idea of the *synteresis*, the spark of good that was supposed to be in all people. Luther began to recognize that at the heart and core of life, every human being is selfish, totally selfish. No human can choose to serve God. Luther said, "It is said that human nature has a general notion of knowing and willing what is good, but that it goes wrong in particulars. It would be better to say that it knows what is good in particular things but that in general it neither knows nor wills the good." Everything people do is finally selfish in the eyes of God. Even when people try to act righteously and worship God, the "old Adam" tries to use God. This force of evil in all who are descendants of Adam totally corrupts people. Even Christians still have this "old Adam" present in their lives. Luther said, "For the judgment of God is infinitely exact. And nothing is done so minutely that it will not be found gross in his sight, nothing so righteous that it will not be found unrighteous, nothing so truthful that it is not found to be a lie, nothing so pure and holy that it is not polluted and profane in his sight."

But this picture of the human condition no longer led Luther to despair. He saw this condition of people as necessary for salvation. "The whole task of the apostle and his Lord is to humble the proud and bring them to a realization of this condition, to teach them that they need grace, to destroy their own righteousness, so that in humility they will seek Christ and confess that they are sinners, and thus receive grace and be saved." The true work of the law was to beat people down, so that they would see their sinful condition and be ready to hear what God has done for them in Jesus Christ.

Luther was rebuilding the road to salvation. In the old way of thinking faith was simply another virtue like hope or love that were to be evident in the lives of Christians. In Luther's understanding faith became a gift of God that connected the believer to Jesus Christ. Salvation and the gift of faith are a process, a never ending process of God's grace given to the Christian. Faith focuses the Christian on Jesus Christ and his work of salvation. In this every tormented soul could find absolute assurance. The age-old question remained. How could someone find release from the accusations of the

conscience or the accusations of God's law? But his answer was fresh and different. Luther wrote: "Nowhere save from Christ and in Christ. For if some complaint should be registered against a heart that believes in Christ, and testify against it concerning some evil deed, then the heart turns itself away, and turns to Christ and says, 'But he made satisfaction. He is the righteous one, and this is my defense. He died for me, he made his righteousness mine and made my sin his own; and if he made my sin his own, then I do not have it, and I am free.'" Human strivings were no longer important. What was important is what Jesus Christ did on the cross. In a letter to a dear friend, he shared his new found faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ: "Therefore, my dear brother, learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to despair of yourself and to pray to him, saying, 'You, Lord Jesus, are my righteousness, but I am your sin; you have taken on yourself what you were not and have given me what I was not.'"

This turned late medieval theology and religious practice upside down. None of the things thought to have merit were of any worth at all before God. Not the monastic life of poverty, not the personal life of self-denial, not the deeds of people, not gifts to the church, nothing meant anything as far as salvation and righteousness were concerned. And in those very moments when people are most human, most fragile, and most guilty, God is most gracious. It is not that God overlooks sin or is not concerned about it. God does not take sin lightly. God took sin very seriously. He took it so seriously that He gave his only Son, Jesus Christ to die to atone for it. "For the sake of Christ," Luther said, "sin is covered and not charged against people, so that they may declare that all their good is outside of them in Christ, who yet through faith is also in them."

The struggle with sin continues all through life for the Christian. The Christian is at one and the same time both righteous and a sinner. Life is still a struggle against evil. Confession of sins and receiving the righteousness of Christ is a gift simply sets the stage for the battle of Christian living. "Let whoever comes to confession," Luther said, "not suppose that he is laying down his burdens so he might live quietly, but let him know that with the burden laid down, he fights in God's army and takes on another burden for God against the devil and against his own personal vices." Luther continued, "The saints at the same time they are righteous are also sinners; righteous because they believe in Christ whose righteousness covers them and is imputed to them, but sinners because they do not fulfill the law and are not without self-seeking, and are like sick men under the care of a physician; they are sick in fact, but healthy in hope and because they are beginning to be healthy in fact, that is, they are being healed. They are people for whom the worst possible thing is the presumption that they are healthy, because they would suffer a worse relapse."

As Luther completed these lectures on Romans, he developed a new way of looking at Christian living. He flatly denied that there was any possibility of becoming genuinely better in the presence of God. Christians could only depend more deeply on the righteousness of God in Christ. "The wounds of Jesus are save enough for us," Luther counseled. Romans 3:28 came to take on profound meaning for Luther. "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law." Luther was finally

freed from his burden. He was finally certain that there was hope for him. He now knew how God could be merciful to him a sinner. It was in the atoning death of Jesus Christ who took our sin upon himself and who gives us his righteousness in exchange.

But as Luther was finding this certainty for his own soul, there were events going on that demonstrated that the old medieval theology and practices were still alive and well. Indulgences, as we said earlier, were a part of the church's heritage. They could be purchased in the belief that they wiped away the punishment for sins committed since Baptism or to make up for the fact that the person had simply done his best. By sacrificing some money, people could wipe their slates clean before God.

The sale of indulgences increased in Germany about this time. The pope in Rome needed funds to rebuild St. Peter's basilica. But there was more. A corrupt German noble wanted to buy the right to be a church bishop in a number of German cities, since he would not otherwise have been eligible. The money was borrowed to make this happen. In addition the pope at this time was Leo X, one of the most corrupt individuals to ever hold the papacy. His most favorite quotes include, "Let us enjoy the Papacy, since God has given it to us." and "What an immense sum have we made out of this fable about Christ." Short on funds, the pope authorized a gigantic effort to sell indulgences in Germany to repay the loan, to satisfy his luxurious lifestyle, and to rebuild the famous church in Rome. A sharp salesman named Johann Tetzel was engaged to make the sales. He traveled around Germany with great fanfare. His sales pitch appealed directly to people's concern for their dead relatives whom they believed were paying the penalty of their sins in purgatory. Tetzel's speech went like this: "Do you not hear the voices of your dead relatives and others, crying out to you and saying, 'Pity us, pity us, for we are in dire punishment and torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance'? And you will not?" Finally there was the appeal: "Will you not then for a quarter of a florin receive these letters of indulgence through which you are able to lead a divine and immortal soul safely and securely into the homeland of paradise?"

While Tetzel's appeal led to enormous sales among the masses of people, the German political leaders saw this effort as "Roman bloodsucking." The elector of Saxony, the ruler of Saxony which included Wittenberg, made it illegal for Tetzel to enter the territory to sell his indulgences. But Tetzel sold them just outside the borders of Saxony. Many of the people of Wittenberg traveled to buy indulgences, either for their loved ones or for themselves. They insisted that Luther recognize them.

Luther was enraged by this practice, for he now understood that it contradicted the discovery that he had made about salvation and the righteousness of God. Luther commented, "I began to preach very moderately that something better could be done than buying indulgences; that he who repents receives forgiveness of sins, gained by Christ's own sacrifice and blood and offered from pure grace, without money, and sold for nothing." Furthermore, it was the custom at the university for people to post theses or statements for debate. Luther wanted his peers at the university to discuss the issue and perhaps to arrive at some sort of solution to the dilemma in Wittenberg. After all, the

elector did not want the sale of indulgences there. The people had bought them anyway. They were insisting on their effectiveness. So something had to be done, decided, or worked out.

In the custom of his day, Luther posted 95 theses against the sale of indulgences on the door of the Castle Church on October 31, 1517. His intended debate, however, turned into an explosion. Luther had no idea at the time of the political ramifications of what he was doing. He had no knowledge of the deals that had been made with the pope or the money that had to be repaid. He did not know that he was setting himself against some very determined and influential people for whom spiritual niceties had little meaning.

The theses were quickly translated in German and widely distributed throughout Germany. Though they were intended for scholarly debate, the theses soon were read by people all over Europe. The theses demonstrate that Luther was still developing his theological position, for the theses speak out only against the abuses of indulgences, not against indulgences themselves. Luther did not plan an upheaval. He was only concerned for the souls of his parishioners in Wittenberg and for scholarly discussion on the issues at hand. Nevertheless, what Luther did in nailing the 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg was the beginning of what was to be the Protestant Reformation of the church. To this day, those theses are remembered in bronze doors engraved with the theses that are still on the side entrance to this famous church in Germany. Once posted, the Reformation was underway. God had prepared Luther to bring back into the church the ideas of a God of mercy, love, grace, and forgiveness.

As we conclude this second lecture, it would be good for us to review a few of the ideas in the development of Luther's peace of mind in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Though written a little later (1522), Luther defines a lot of the key ideas in his theology in his Preface to the Book of Romans. I would like to conclude this evening with a few quotations from Preface, because it will help us look once more at these very important ideas.

Grace is the kindness or favor which God bears toward us of His own choice, and through which He is willing to give us Christ, and to pour out the Holy Spirit and His blessings upon us. Nevertheless, both the gifts and the spirit must be received by us daily; although even then they will be incomplete; for the old desires and sins still linger in us and strive against the spirit Yet grace is sufficient to enable us to be accounted entirely and completely righteous in God's sight, because His grace does not come in portions and pieces, separately, like so many gifts; rather, it takes us up completely into its embrace for the sake of Christ.

Faith, however, is something that God effects in us. It changes us and we are reborn from God. Faith is a living and unshakable confidence, a belief in the grace of God so assured that a man would die a thousand deaths for its sake.

Righteousness means precisely the kind of faith we have in mind, and should properly be called “divine righteousness,” the righteousness which holds good in God’s sight, because it is God’s gift, and shapes a man’s nature to do his duty to all. By his faith, he is set free from sin, and he finds delight in God’s commandments. . . . Righteousness of this kind cannot be brought about in the ordinary course of nature, by our own free will, or by our own powers.

In chapter 3 . . . Paul returns to the fact that all men are sinners, and proves his case from Scripture. He declares that no one will be justified by fulfilling the requirements of the law, because the law was given only to show the nature of sin. He then elaborates his teaching of the right way to become godly and sanctified. He says that all men are sinners, and that no one are approved by God. Salvation can only come to them, unearned, by virtue of faith in Christ. Christ has earned it for us through His blood. For our sakes, He has become God’s “mercy-seat,” and so God forgives all the sins that we have committed in the past. In this way, God shows that His own righteousness, which He confers through the medium of faith, is our only help.

Tonight we have seen how Luther discovered for himself the good news of Jesus Christ, the precious Gospel, the message that salvation is a gift of God through faith in Jesus Christ. For Luther, the journey to this discovery included an intense period of soul-searching, a time of spiritual doubt and uncertainty, a questioning of what he had been taught as a youth, and an openness to discovering the truths of God in Holy Scripture. The Holy Spirit used the book of Romans in the Scriptures as the tool for Luther to discover the Gospel. That Book of the Bible is unparalleled in presenting the Gospel. For people today who are troubled by the same thing and looking for the peace that Luther found in Jesus Christ, there is no better place to look than in this Book of the Bible. Again, Luther’s opening words in this preface are significant: “This epistle is in truth the most important document in the New Testament, the gospel in its purest expression. Not only is it well worth a Christian’s while to know it word for word by heart, but also to meditate on it day by day. It is the soul’s daily bread, and can never be read to often, or studied too much.”

To understand the Reformation is to understand the grace of God in Jesus Christ, the righteousness that is given freely by faith, the utter hopelessness of depending on our own merits or deeds. This was Luther’s discovery in the second decade of the 16th century. As we shall see tomorrow, the Devil is never happy when the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed. Luther would run into opposition. But God prepared him spiritually for what lay ahead by giving him the peace of finding forgiveness for his sins in the death of God’s Son, Jesus Christ.