

# Luther at Worms (1521)

*“Here I stand. I can do no other.” — the Augustinian monk who nailed ninety-five theses to a church door, refused to recant before an emperor, and fractured Western Christendom • 1483–1546*

By Shane Gunn • Following Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points*, ch. 6

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**Where this fits:** Lesson 15 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — Noll’s sixth turning point and the single most consequential moment for every Protestant church in the world. Luther’s theology rests on **Augustine (Lesson 9)**; his Bible was made possible by **the translation culture** Erasmus had already seeded; his protest inherits the grievances of **the Great Schism** and of Hus a century earlier. See the full **Series Timeline**.

## WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

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On 18 April 1521, in the Bishop’s Palace at the Imperial Diet of Worms in Germany, an Augustinian monk named **Martin Luther** refused to recant his writings before the Holy Roman Emperor, the papal legate, and the assembled princes of the German nation. He was thirty-seven years old. He was one man against every institutional authority in Western Europe. By the end of the day he had become the most famous outlaw in Christendom.

Forty-three days earlier, on the advice of his prince, Luther had made his will. He told his closest friends: “I will enter Worms under the banner of Christ against the gates of hell.” He did not know whether he would come out alive. Jan Hus had been burned at Constance in 1415 after accepting exactly the same imperial safe-conduct Luther was now carrying (see **Lesson 13**

**Part 3).** Luther's friend Justus Jonas later said that the day he rode into Worms was the bravest thing he ever saw a human being do.

Five hundred years later every Protestant congregation in the world still carries the mark of what Luther said on the second day of that Diet. Every time a believer opens a Bible in their own language, takes communion they believe forgives their sin, trusts that salvation is a gift and not a transaction, or reads Romans 1:17 and understands it — the shape of that moment is Wittenberg, not Rome.

*Greek NT (Rom 1:17): δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, καθὼς γέγραπται· ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται.*

Romans 1:17 (ESV): “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

This was the verse that converted the monk. Everything that follows is its commentary.

## PART 1 — CHRISTENDOM IN 1500

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The Christendom Luther was born into in 1483 was, on its surface, more institutionally powerful than it had ever been. And, on its surface, more corrupt.

- **The papacy.** Pope Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia, r. 1492–1503) openly kept mistresses and fathered at least seven children during and before his pontificate. Pope Julius II (r. 1503–1513), the “warrior pope,” personally led armies in the field and commissioned the demolition and rebuilding of St. Peter’s Basilica. Pope Leo X (r. 1513–1521), the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, reportedly greeted his election with the words “since God has given us the papacy, let us enjoy it.” He bankrupted the Vatican treasury funding the arts and the St. Peter’s rebuilding.

- **Indulgences.** To fund St. Peter’s and to pay off Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz’s enormous debt for having bought three episcopal offices, Leo X authorized a massive indulgence campaign across Germany in 1515–1517. A “plenary indulgence” could — purchasers were told — release a soul from purgatory and grant remission of sins’

temporal penalties. The chief German salesman was a Dominican friar named **Johann Tetzel**, whose advertising jingle became infamous: “*When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.*”

- **The printing press.** Gutenberg’s movable-type press had been in use for 70 years by 1520. Germany had perhaps 200 active print shops. A short Latin pamphlet could be set, printed, and distributed across the empire in weeks — something impossible in every previous reform attempt. Hus had nothing like this; Wycliffe had nothing like this. Luther would exploit it like no one before him.

- **The Renaissance Bible.** In 1516 **Erasmus of Rotterdam** published the first printed Greek New Testament — the *Novum Instrumentum omne* — with a fresh Latin translation alongside. For the first time in a millennium, a scholar could read the New Testament in the language it was written in without leaving his library. Luther bought a copy. He used it constantly.

- **Rising critical voices.** Erasmus himself, Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples in France, John Colet in England, and a chorus of humanist scholars were already demanding reform — of clerical abuse, of piety, of theology. None of them would have imagined producing the thing Luther did.

## PART 2 — THE MAKING OF A MONK (1483–1517)

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**10 November 1483** • Born at **Eisleben** in Saxony, to Hans Luder (a copper-mining foreman, later a modest investor) and Margarethe. Baptized the next morning, St. Martin’s Day, and named after the saint.

**1501–1505** • Student at the University of Erfurt. Completes his Master of Arts in 1505 and enrolls in the law faculty at his father’s insistence.

**2 July 1505** • Returning to Erfurt after visiting his parents, Luther is caught in a violent thunderstorm at Stotternheim. A lightning bolt strikes the ground near him. He cries out: “*Saint Anne, help me! I will become a monk!*” Within two weeks he has given away his books, said goodbye to his friends, and entered the Observant Augustinian monastery at Erfurt. His father never forgave him.

**1507** • Ordained priest. At his first Mass, the twenty-three-year-old is so overcome with terror at the thought of offering the sacrifice of Christ’s body to God the Father that he nearly flees the altar. His superior has to whisper him through the liturgy.

**1510–1511** • Sent on a monastic errand to Rome. He is horrified by the corruption of the papal court, the carelessness of Italian priests at Mass, and the brothels flanking the Vatican. Decades later he still remembered the visit as a sickness of the soul.

**1511** • Transferred to the Augustinian house at **Wittenberg**, a small Saxon university town on the Elbe. He will live there the rest of his life.

**1512** • Receives his doctorate in theology and is appointed Professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg. His teaching cycle in these years is the engine of his whole later theology: *Psalms* (1513–1515), *Romans* (1515–1516), *Galatians* (1516–1517), *Hebrews* (1517–1518).

**c. 1513–1519** • The **Tower Experience**. Somewhere in the course of lecturing on Psalms and Romans, Luther has the decisive interior breakthrough. For years he had been terrified of the phrase “the righteousness of God” (*iustitia Dei*) because he understood it as a righteousness God demands of us. Now, re-reading Romans 1:17, he sees it is a righteousness God *gives* us — the righteousness that God clothes the believer with in Christ, received through faith. He later described it as “the gate of heaven thrown open.”

*“At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”*

— Martin Luther, Preface to the Complete Edition of his Latin Writings (1545), recalling the breakthrough

### PART 3 — THE NINETY-FIVE THESES (31 OCTOBER 1517)

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By October 1517 Luther was a thirty-three-year-old theology professor with a local pastoral responsibility. Tetzel's indulgence campaign was operating just across the Saxon border in neighboring Magdeburg territory. Wittenberg parishioners were crossing the border to buy their remission and coming home waving printed receipts. Luther was hearing their confessions and discovering that they thought they had already been absolved without repentance.

On 31 October 1517 — All Hallows Eve, the day before the relic-filled All Saints' Day celebration at the Castle Church — Luther sent a letter of protest to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz. With the letter he enclosed a list of **ninety-five theses**, in Latin, intended as points for academic debate. He may or may not also have nailed a copy to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg (the door being the customary university notice-board; the tradition of the actual nailing comes from Philip Melancthon and is accepted by most modern Luther scholars).

The theses themselves are a surprisingly moderate document. Luther is not attacking the Pope; he is attacking salesmen misleading the people. But three theses cut deep:

#### THE NINETY-FIVE THESES • SELECTIONS

- 1.** When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said "Repent," he willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.
- 27.** They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the coin jingles into the money-box, the soul flies out of purgatory.
- 62.** The true treasure of the Church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.
- 86.** Why does the Pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the basilica of St. Peter with the money of poor believers

rather than with his own money?

— Martin Luther, 95 Theses, 31 October 1517 (extracts)

**The pamphlet explosion.** Friends translated the Latin theses into German; printers in Nuremberg, Leipzig, and Basel set them in type; within two weeks they were read across Germany; within two months across Europe. Luther later said he had started something he never intended to start. By the end of 1517 the fire was out of his control.

## PART 4 — FROM WITTENBERG TO WORMS (1517–1521)

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Between the theses of 1517 and the Diet of 1521, Rome tried and failed four times to shut Luther down. Each failure deepened his theological position.

**April 1518 • The Heidelberg Disputation.** Summoned to defend his views before the Augustinian chapter meeting at Heidelberg, Luther delivers his famous *theologia crucis* (“theology of the cross”) propositions: God is known not in glory and power but in weakness, suffering, and the cross of Christ. He converts several younger Augustinians who will become leading reformers — Martin Bucer among them.

**October 1518 • Augsburg — Cardinal Cajetan.** Rome sends the distinguished Dominican theologian Cardinal Cajetan (Tommaso de Vio) to interrogate Luther at Augsburg. Cajetan orders Luther simply to recant. Luther refuses. He slips out of Augsburg by night on a horse without a saddle, fearing arrest.

**June–July 1519 • The Leipzig Debate.** The great Catholic debater **Johann Eck** challenges Karlstadt and Luther at Leipzig. Eck corners Luther into defending doctrines similar to those of Jan Hus — including the claim that popes and councils have erred. Luther agrees: “Councils can err, and have erred.” The Roman authorities now have the public heresy they need for a formal condemnation.

**Summer–Autumn 1520 • The Three Treatises.** Luther publishes in German, one after another, the three works that together define the Protestant platform for every generation to follow:

- ***To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*** (August 1520) — appeal to the German princes as the lay “priesthood of all believers” to reform the church when the clergy will not. Demolishes the “three walls” by which the Pope claimed immunity from reform.

- ***The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*** (October 1520) — technical treatise reducing the seven Roman sacraments to two (baptism and the Lord’s Supper), rejecting transubstantiation in favor of a real-presence “sacramental union,” and calling the whole sacramental system of Rome a captivity of the gospel.

- ***On the Freedom of a Christian*** (November 1520) — the sweetest of the three, personally dedicated to Pope Leo X. Its first two sentences are the entire Lutheran gospel in a pair of paradoxes:

*“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone.”*

— **Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, opening lines (November 1520)**

**15 June 1520 • *Exsurge Domine*.** Pope Leo X issues the bull “Arise, O Lord” condemning forty-one of Luther’s propositions and giving him sixty days to recant or be excommunicated.

**10 December 1520 • The Bonfire.** Outside the Elster Gate at Wittenberg, in a crowd of students and citizens, Luther publicly **burns** the papal bull and a pile of canon-law books. The break is now irreversible.

**3 January 1521 • *Decet Romanum Pontificem*.** The formal bull of

excommunication. Luther is expelled from the Catholic Church.

## PART 5 – THE DIET OF WORMS (APRIL 1521)

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Emperor **Charles V**, newly crowned at age twenty and ruler of the largest European empire since Charlemagne (Spain, the Netherlands, Austria, much of Italy, and the German empire), had to decide what to do with Luther. The Pope wanted Luther burned. The German princes, especially Luther's prince **Frederick the Wise** of Saxony, demanded that Luther at least be given a hearing. Charles reluctantly agreed, and against papal advice granted Luther an imperial safe-conduct to attend the Diet (the imperial parliament) at the Rhine-valley city of **Worms**.

Luther left Wittenberg on 2 April 1521 with a small escort of friends. His journey of 300 miles became a kind of triumphal procession; he preached to packed churches in Erfurt, Eisenach, and Frankfurt. Crowds cheered him through the gates of Worms on 16 April. A papal nuncio, Jerome Aleander, reported to Rome with fury that “nine tenths of Germany shouts for Luther; the other tenth shouts, ‘Down with Rome.’”

**17 April 1521 — First session.** Luther is summoned into the Bishop's Hall before the Emperor, six electors, princes, bishops, imperial knights, and about two hundred observers. A table is piled with his books. The imperial official Johann von der Ecken asks him two questions: *Are these books yours? Will you recant them?* Luther acknowledges the books, then requests time to consider the second question. The request is granted; he is given 24 hours.

That night he writes out his answer. He prays for hours. Several friends report him in deep agony.

**18 April 1521 — Second session.** Luther is brought back into the hall. In torchlight (the session had run long and the afternoon was closing), he is asked again whether he will recant. He answers, first in German and then in Latin, with a prepared statement ending in these lines:

**LUTHER AT WORMS • 18 APRIL 1521**

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason — for I do not trust in the Pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves — I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and 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. Amen.”**

— The famous concluding words “Hier stehe ich. Ich kann nicht anders” (“Here I stand. I can do no other”) appear in the earliest printed editions but not in the eyewitness reports; they may be Luther’s own addition to the speech when he prepared it for publication a few weeks later. Either way, the phrase captures what he meant.

**The aftermath.** The Emperor was furious. The next day he issued a written declaration: “A single friar who goes counter to all Christendom for a thousand years must be wrong. Therefore I am resolved to stake my lands, my friends, my body, my blood, my life, and my soul against him.” Luther was given twenty-one days of safe-conduct to leave Worms; after that, he was an outlaw.

On 25 May 1521, after Luther had departed, the Diet issued the **Edict of Worms**, declaring Luther a heretic and outlaw, forbidding anyone to shelter him on pain of the same punishment, ordering his writings burned throughout the empire, and calling for his arrest — safe-conduct expired — and execution.

## **PART 6 — WARTBURG AND THE GERMAN BIBLE (1521–1522)**

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On 4 May 1521, as Luther rode through the Thuringian Forest on his way home to Wittenberg, a band of armed men burst from the trees, shouted threats, dragged him off his horse, and carried him away. Rumor across Germany said he had been murdered by papal agents. Albrecht Dürer, the great German artist, wrote in his diary: “O God, if Luther is dead, who will now explain the Gospel to us?”

In fact the “kidnappers” were friendly knights in the service of **Frederick the Wise**. They delivered Luther to the **Wartburg Castle** high on a crag above Eisenach, where he was given a hidden apartment under the alias *Junker Jörg* (“Squire George”). He grew a beard, wore a sword, and was ordered to look like a knight. He stayed ten months.

**What he did at the Wartburg.** Isolated and unable to preach, Luther wrote at ferocious speed. Treatises on confession, on vows, on the Mass. A stream of pastoral letters to Wittenberg. And the single project that would matter most: he translated the entire **New Testament from Erasmus’s Greek into German** in about eleven weeks.

The *September Testament* appeared in print in September 1522. Its linguistic impact on the German language is beyond calculation — roughly comparable to Shakespeare’s on English, except that Luther’s Bible was also the Bible every German Protestant read in church. Luther’s complete Bible, including the Old Testament translated from the **Hebrew Masoretic Text**, was finished in 1534. (Luther’s German Bible is the direct model for **Tyndale’s English Bible**, which began appearing just three years later.)

**Back to Wittenberg.** In March 1522 Luther returned to Wittenberg openly, against his prince’s orders, to calm radical reformers who had begun smashing altars and images in his absence. He preached the eight *Invocavit sermons* in eight days and restored order. The German Reformation would be a *magisterial* reformation — ordered, princely, liturgically continuous — not a revolution. This decision would shape Lutheranism ever after.

## PART 7 — THE FIVE SOLAS

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Luther himself did not use the phrase “the five *solas*.” The Latin slogans were assembled later (in their modern form largely in the 20th century) as a summary of the convictions the magisterial Reformers shared. But every one of the five is deeply Luther’s:

**Sola  
Scriptura**

*Scripture alone  
as final  
authority*

**Sola Fide**

*faith alone  
as the  
instrument*

**Sola Gratia**

*grace alone  
as the ground*

**Solus  
Christus**

*Christ alone  
as mediator*

**Soli Deo  
Gloria**

*to God alone  
be the glory*

**A short commentary on each.**

• **Sola Scriptura.** Scripture is the final and supreme authority in the church for faith and practice. Tradition, councils, and fathers are valuable *norma normata* (“ruled rule”) — but Scripture is the *norma normans* (“ruling rule”). *Not* “only the Bible and nothing else” — Luther loved the creeds and the fathers — but Scripture is the supreme judge of them all.

• **Sola Fide.** Justification — being declared righteous before God — is received by faith alone, not by works. Luther’s most-cited proof text is Rom 3:28 (“we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law”), where his famous German translation adds the word *allein* (“alone”). He defended the added word fiercely as faithful to Paul’s sense.

• **Sola Gratia.** Salvation is entirely God’s unmerited gift. Faith itself is a gift. Luther’s *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525), written against Erasmus, is the most uncompromising defense of this ever penned in Latin. Luther thought the book — along with his Catechisms — was the only thing he had written that would last.

• **Solus Christus.** Christ alone is the mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5). The whole system of saints, priests, indulgences, purgatory, and treasury of merits is set aside as a usurpation of Christ’s office.

• **Soli Deo Gloria.** Every good human work is God’s grace in us; therefore every credit returns to him. Luther closed most of his hymns and many letters with this formula; Johann Sebastian Bach, two centuries later, signed every score with its initials (*S.D.G.*).

*Greek NT (Eph 2:8–9): τῆ γὰρ χάριτί ἐστε σεσωσμένοι διὰ πίστεως· καὶ τοῦτο οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν, θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον· οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων, ἵνα μὴ τις καυχῆσθαι.*

Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV): “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

## PART 8 — LUTHER’S DARK CORNERS

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Luther was not a saint in the devotional sense. The same man who gave the church the doctrine of grace also produced two corpuses of writing that honest Lutheran theologians today repudiate, and that every responsible treatment of his legacy has to name.

**The Peasants’ War (1524–1525).** Peasants across southern and central Germany, inspired partly by Luther’s rhetoric of Christian freedom, rose against their landlords, demanding an end to serfdom and restoration of traditional village rights. They cited Luther. Radicals like **Thomas Müntzer** led peasant armies. Luther, horrified at the chaos and unwilling to see the magisterial Reformation tainted with rebellion, published *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants* (May 1525), calling on the princes to “smite, slay, and stab, secretly and openly, as one would kill a mad dog.” The princes did exactly that. About 100,000 peasants were killed. Luther lost the allegiance of the common people in much of Germany and never fully regained it.

**Against the Jews (1543).** In his last years, Luther wrote a series of pamphlets — most notoriously *On the Jews and their Lies* (1543) — urging German rulers to burn Jewish synagogues and schools, destroy Jewish homes, seize Jewish books, forbid rabbis to teach, confiscate Jewish property, and enforce conscripted manual labor on Jewish men and women. This material is genuinely monstrous. It was reprinted by the Nazis in the 1930s and quoted at the Nuremberg trials. Modern Lutheran bodies — the LCMS, the ELCA, the Lutheran World Federation — have formally and repeatedly repudiated these writings. Lutherans today are rightly still embarrassed by them.

A church history that cannot name these things has no moral authority to celebrate the rest. Luther’s doctrine of grace was right; his writing on the peasants and the Jews was deeply wrong; both are his, and the honest approach is to own both.

## PART 9 — LUTHER’S LIFE AFTER WORMS (1525–1546)

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**13 June 1525** • Marries **Katharina von Bora**, a former Cistercian nun. Their household at the “Black Cloister” in Wittenberg becomes the model Protestant parsonage — shaping pastoral family life for the next five centuries. Six children, including two who die young.

**1525** • *On the Bondage of the Will*, his response to Erasmus’ *Diatribes on Free Will*. His most rigorous theological work.

**1529** • The **Small Catechism** and **Large Catechism**. Written to catechize German children and parents after Luther discovered during a visitation tour how shockingly ignorant the laity were. The Small Catechism is still the most widely-used single catechetical document in Protestant Christianity.

**1529** • **Marburg Colloquy**. Luther meets **Huldrych Zwingli** at Marburg Castle to try to unite the German and Swiss Reformations. They agree on fourteen of fifteen articles; they fail on the fifteenth — the Lord’s Supper. Luther, writing the words “*Hoc est corpus meum*” (“This is my body”) in chalk on the table before them, will not yield. The Reformation splits into Lutheran and Reformed streams, a division that still exists.

**1530** • The **Augsburg Confession**, drafted by Luther’s colleague Philip Melancthon and presented to Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg. The foundational Lutheran confession, still binding on Lutheran pastors today.

**1534** • Luther’s complete German Bible is published.

**18 February 1546** • Luther dies at Eisleben, the town of his birth, on a preaching trip. On a scrap of paper by his bed the last words he wrote: “*We are beggars. This is true.*” He was sixty-two.

Noll's chapter on Luther is titled *The Beginnings of Protestantism: The Diet of Worms (1521)*. He is careful to note that "Protestantism" as a label does not appear until 1529 (when Lutheran princes "protested" against an anti-Luther vote at the Diet of Speyer) and that the coherent Protestant family of churches takes decades to form. But the turning-point quality of Worms is undeniable on three levels:

- **Doctrinally.** Luther made the theology of grace — already there in Paul, clarified by Augustine, buried under a millennium of penitential practice — once again the central organizing principle of Christian existence. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is now shared, in varying forms, by every Protestant church and was formally conceded in its main thrust by the Catholic-Lutheran *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999).

- **Politically.** Worms made it clear that a theologian, backed by a prince, could break communion with Rome and survive. That political fact triggered the Reformation's expansion into Switzerland (Zwingli and Calvin), England (under Henry VIII), Scandinavia, and the Dutch provinces, in each case by local political sponsorship.

- **Culturally.** The Reformation's demand that every Christian read Scripture in their own language catalyzed universal vernacular Bible translation, mass printing, universal literacy campaigns, and the eventual modern sense that ordinary people have the right and responsibility to engage serious texts for themselves. Whatever modern Protestant Christians do not love about modernity — they live inside a modernity that this Augustinian monk at Worms helped make.

## WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

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- **Conscience bound by the Word.** Luther's Worms statement is not a modern individualist manifesto. It is the exact opposite: a conscience bound, *captive*, to Scripture. What he refused to do was violate that binding. The model he leaves us is not

“follow your heart” but “submit your heart to Scripture, and from that submission, refuse to be moved.”

• **Grace is still the gospel.** Five hundred years after Worms, the temptation to turn Christianity into a transaction — good works for God’s favor, spiritual performance for spiritual standing — has not gone away. Every generation of the church needs a Luther to name the indulgence-sellers of its own day.

• **Vernacular Scripture changes everything.** Luther’s German New Testament, Tyndale’s English, and every translation after them rest on the conviction that the gospel speaks every language because the Spirit speaks every language. A congregation that acts otherwise — by making the Bible a clergy possession, by treating theology as specialist jargon, by assuming the pew should just trust the pulpit — is not more reverent than Luther. It is less.

• **Great saints have dark corners.** Luther’s anti-Jewish writings and his call to slaughter the peasants are real and terrible. To honor Luther is not to defend them. The church honors faithful servants by telling their whole story — their breakthroughs and their betrayals — and by refusing to copy the parts they got catastrophically wrong.

*Greek NT (Gal 2:16): εἰδότες δὲ ὅτι οὐ δικαιοῦται ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἔργων νόμου ἐὰν μὴ διαπίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.*

Galatians 2:16 (ESV): “We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Luther’s breakthrough on Romans 1:17 was that “the righteousness of God” is a gift God gives rather than a standard he demands. Have you ever read a familiar verse

differently after realizing you had been reading it wrong? What changed?

**2.** Tetzel's indulgences promised forgiveness for a transaction. What are the modern equivalents in our own Christian culture — the things we quietly trade for God's favor?

**3.** Luther at Worms said his conscience was captive to the Word of God. Most of us use "conscience" to mean "my inner feelings." How does Luther's usage differ, and what would it change to use his definition?

**4.** The five *solas* were worked out from Luther's convictions. Which one do you think your own congregation most needs to hear recovered right now?

**5.** Luther's response to the Peasants' War and his later writings on the Jews are genuinely terrible. What is the right way for a Protestant congregation to handle the fact that its founding father had such dark corners?

**6.** "We are beggars. This is true." Those were Luther's last written words. If they are true, how should our worship, our giving, our service this week look?

## CLOSING PRAYER

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Father, we thank you for the Augustinian monk in Wittenberg who read Romans 1:17 until paradise opened. Thank you for Tetzel that he was such a bad salesman that Luther could no longer sit silent. Thank you for Frederick the Wise, who sheltered Luther when the Emperor wanted him dead. Thank you for Katharina, for the September Testament, for the Small Catechism, for the hymn *Ein feste Burg*. Forgive Luther his rage against the peasants and the Jews; forgive us where we repeat him there rather than where he was right. Bind our consciences to your Word. Teach us that we

are beggars. Send us back to the gospel we half believe until it is all we trust. Through Jesus Christ our only mediator. Amen.

## FURTHER READING

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### Primary sources:

- Luther, *95 Theses* (1517); the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518); the three great treatises of 1520 (*To the Christian Nobility*, *Babylonian Captivity*, *Freedom of a Christian*).
- Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525); the *Small and Large Catechisms* (1529); the 1545 Preface to the Latin Writings (with the Tower Experience narrative).
- The *Augsburg Confession* (1530) — the foundational Lutheran confession.
- The acts of the Diet of Worms, as preserved in the reports of Spalatin and Cochlaeus.
- Luther's German Bible (1522 NT, 1534 complete).
- The standard English edition is *Luther's Works* (LW), 82 volumes projected, Concordia/Fortress, 1955–present.

### Modern studies:

- **Mark A. Noll**, *Turning Points* (3rd ed., 2012), ch. 6: “The Beginnings of Protestantism: The Diet of Worms (1521).”
- Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (1950) — the best-known popular biography.
- Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (ET 1989) — the best serious biography in English.
- Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 3 vols. (ET 1985–1993) — the definitive scholarly life.
- Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (2016) — an excellent recent biography.

- Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life* (2015) — warm pastoral retrieval for Protestants.
- Scott Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (2015).
- Joint Catholic-Lutheran *Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) — the modern ecumenical settlement on the core Reformation issue.

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