

# Walking Among the Redwoods (1)

## *Martin Luther*

By Todd Pruitt

J.I. Packer once compared the Puritans (1550-1700) to red wood trees. The red woods, which grow near the Pacific coast in Northern California, are the largest living things on earth. Many of these giants grow to 360 feet tall with trunks reaching more than 60 feet around. Packer's point is clear. The Puritans, his heroes, make him feel quite small in comparison. I feel the same way when I consider my own heroes. Over the next several months I will be paying homage to those men who have had the greatest impact on my ministry and my thinking. God has used these men at various times to teach, challenge, rebuke, and inspire me. I am better because of them. Consider these articles as a walk among the red woods.

## Martin Luther

“Let the man who would hear God speak, read Holy Scripture.” So wrote Martin Luther in 1545, the year before he died. There is probably no better way to sum up Luther's understanding of Christian spirituality. He was a man wholly captive to the Word of God. Indeed the Protestant Reformation was a Bible saturated movement. Knox, Wycliffe, Calvin, and of course, Luther were the architects of *Sola Scriptura* which held that Scripture was the sole source of infallible authority for life and doctrine. This was a radical notion for a church that had come to believe that Popes, councils, and tradition carried the same authority as holy Scripture. Luther's challenge to established church teaching would spark the most significant event in church history since the time of the Apostles.

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany in 1483 to a working class family. When he was nineteen, after being nearly struck by lightning, he cried out, “Help me, Saint Anne; I will become a monk.” So afraid was he for his soul that he believed the only thing that could save him was the disciplined piety that could be had at a monastery. Much to his father's dismay, Luther carried through with his vow and became an Augustinian monk. But the insulation of monastic life did not shield Martin from the torments of a guilty conscience. What the young monk knew was that a God who is perfectly holy cannot look past sin. He reasoned that if the greatest commandment was to love God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, then the greatest sin was to fail to love God that way; a sin Luther knew he committed every day. Even his outstanding performance as a pious monk was but filthy rags to a holy God and he knew it. It was not until Luther discovered the message of Romans 1:17, “the righteous will live by faith,” that he realized the freedom that comes from being truly born again. “Here I felt

that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.” Nothing would ever be the same for Martin Luther.

Once this monk from Wittenberg understood the gospel, his course was set. He could do nothing less than be a herald for the good news which the church had so long distorted. Luther would soon find himself at the center of a movement that would change the church and reshape western culture. On October 31, 1517 Luther nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the church at Wittenberg. On January 3, 1521 Luther was officially excommunicated. In the spring of that year he was granted a hearing at the Diet of Worms where he was confronted with his writings and given the chance to recant. Luther replied, “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason...I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me. Amen.”

Luther was a seminary president, a university professor, and a pastor. But in his heart, it was his role as preacher of the Bible that he treasured most. He once said, “If I could today be king or emperor, I would not give up my office as preacher.” One biographer called Luther one of the greatest preachers in Christian history. Martin was also a family man. He and his wife Katie (a former nun) had six children. Their second child, Elizabeth died when she was only eight months old. He struggled with health problems ranging from arthritis, kidney problems, severe digestive difficulties, and angina which would eventually kill him. Like all of us, Luther was a flawed and sinful man. He was well known for having a caustic tongue. He would berate his opponents with strong language. In his defense, however, Luther understood the stakes of the conflict to be sky high. He was involved in a battle over the gospel of Christ and he refused to compromise. We see this same fierce commitment in Paul’s letter to the Galatians which revolved around a similar battle for the gospel. Luther would write in a letter, “A mind conscious of truth cannot always endure the obstinate and willfully blind enemies of truth.”

We need Martin Luther today for many reasons. We need him to remind us of God’s sovereignty in salvation. Man’s tendency is to want to take credit for at least a portion of his salvation. Luther rejected the notion that unregenerate men and women have the capacity to freely choose salvation apart from the intervening grace of God. “Apart from Christ, sin and death are our masters and the devil is our god and prince, there can be no strength or power, no wit or wisdom, by which we can fit or fashion ourselves for righteousness and life.” We also need Luther to be reminded of the authority and all sufficiency of God’s Word. On this, Luther could not be more timely. How the church today has departed from the Scriptures! Preachers today prefer crowd pleasing meditations on self-esteem and life skills. Bolstered more by fads than the truth, the church is in danger of exchanging the privilege of saying, “Thus says the

Lord,” in favor of a cheap counterfeit. We also need Luther today to show us that a compromised truth is too high a price to pay for a superficial unity.

I love Martin Luther for his humanity, warts and all. I love him for his zeal for God’s Word. I love him for the love he had for Christ’s bride. I love him for his willingness to know Christ in His sufferings. I love him for his ability to engage in titanic battles for the gospel during the day and in the evening retire to his home to spend tranquil hours with his beloved Katie and children. I love Martin Luther for saying things like this:

*“In truth you cannot read too much in Scripture; and what you read you cannot read too carefully, and what you read carefully you cannot understand too well, and what you understand well you cannot teach too well, and what you teach well you cannot live too well.”*

**Recommended books by and about Martin Luther:**

On the Bondage of the Will by Martin Luther

Table Talk by Martin Luther

On Christian Liberty by Martin Luther

Here I Stand by Roland Bainton

Luther by Heiko Oberman

The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther ed. by Donald McKim

The Legacy of Sovereign Joy by John Piper