

## What Made Martin Luther Different?.

Text: Rev 2:10

Suggested Hymns:

195, 335, 324, 292, 179

1) Scripture alone

2) Grace Alone

3) Faith alone

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Revelation 10:2, *<sup>2</sup>He had a little book open in his hand.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

What made Martin Luther different? What was there about his message that made the world prick up its ears and listen eagerly to what he had to say?

The Christian world — let us remember — had been going on for some 1,400 years, during which time many minds and outstanding leaders had spoken. There was Chrysostom (347 to 407), Augustine (354—430), Thomas Aquinas (1225—1274), John Wyclif (1320—1384), and Thomas a Kempis (1380—1471).

All Europe was Christianized and Christendom lived under one corporate body. Most of the great doctrines of the church had been crystallised. Christian zeal had been whipped into a fanatic enthusiasm in a number of crusades to rescue Jerusalem from Mohammedanism.

Cathedrals had been built which are the showplaces of Europe to this day. Theologians debated endless issues, down to the rather trivial — yes, ridiculous — question as to how many angels could stand on a pinpoint.

Every form of rite and ritual was definitely prescribed, and each rank and office in the church was defined. Any person or group not fitting into the pattern was ruled out. Any who did not “toe the mark” were promptly excommunicated. Those who spoke against the abuses of organised religion were publicly burnt at the stake as heretics, such as Hus of Bohemia, Savonarola of Italy, and Tyndale of England.

Why did Martin Luther escape this fate? Why did the people rally around him and did not let him go to the flames? What were his specific contributions which made him the great figure he was in the Christian world and in history?

May the Lord bless our meditation as we consider the question, What made Martin Luther different?

### **1. Solo Scriptura — “Scripture Alone”**

What made Martin Luther different was his rediscovery of the glorious truth that Scripture is the sole, as well as, the final authority on all things spiritual. Luther had sought for his own peace of mind an authority that was firmer than the rock of Gibraltar, and could for all time to come, settle for him these questions -

Such questions as, What is truth? What makes our salvation certain? What decides in every age and at all times what is right and what is wrong in the realm of moral behaviour? Public opinion varies from community to community and changes its concepts of right and wrong with the changing times.

Luther emphasised that the truths of God and the will of God are unalterable. The builder who makes plans for a house or a church and proceeds to erect his building must know that two plus two equals four and that 16 ounces always make one pound. It must never be otherwise.

Much more man must know that God’s terms of salvation are always the same the world over. There must be an authority which is above councils and synods and convention resolutions, for these have contradicted each other and anathematised one another. Where, then, shall we find this absolute truth, from which there can be no appeal?

Martin Luther found this absolutely final authority in the Scriptures. At Worms he said, *“Unless I am convinced by Scripture ... my conscience is bound to God’s Word.”* What the Scriptures say was true in Abraham’s day and was also true at the beginning of the 16th century at Wittenberg, where Luther lived. Luther knew from personal experience the desperate reality that sin is something that displeases God and separates us from God. Nothing unclean can stand in God’s holy presence. Luther knew that the human heart is woefully wicked, that man is born in sin and cannot free himself from the shackles of sin.

All philosophical reasoning and psychiatric manipulation cannot change this fact, and the Bible made Luther's sensitive conscience realise the truth that sin in all its ugliness was found also within his soul. As he looked into his own heart he could not deny his own guilt, nor could he find in any of his efforts a way to make amends and to gain the guarantee that he had done enough to appease the wrath of God.

But it was the Bible that revealed to him the cure for his troubled soul — peace with God through faith in the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. In this revealed Word Luther found the authority he could not question or doubt without making God a liar. Therefore he felt that he could stake his all upon ***“Thus says the Lord.”***

Luther consistently refused to allow traditions, customs, and public opinion to sway him. A letter from the Pope and century-old usages do not guarantee infallibility. Luther stood with Simon Peter who wrote, ***“we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”***<sup>1</sup> And again, <sup>19</sup> ***And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed ...*** <sup>20</sup> ***knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation,*** <sup>21</sup> ***for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.***<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly Martin Luther opened his Bible and there found the truth and then stood upon this truth. Every thesis and statement he sought to base on the Scriptures and so to prove his assertions true. What Scripture says was final with him.

With such authority to build upon, Luther through faith in Christ found peace of heart and mind. 1 John 1:7 says, ***the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.*** This is final and true. ***“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”***<sup>3</sup> So it is written, and God does not lie.

No matter what conscience said, what theologians concocted, Luther stood his ground with ***“Thus says the Lord.”*** The conviction that Scripture alone is the sole authority in things spiritual gave those who heard him or read his writings the same peace of mind.

This same confidence in the authority of Scripture we must have if we are to be sure of our salvation. Nothing else will do. This was Martin Luther's first all-important contribution to mankind: Sola Scriptura — "Scripture Alone."

## 2. Sola Gratia — "By Grace Alone"

What made Martin Luther differ from many of his predecessors was his rediscovery of the great Bible truth that we are saved solely and alone by the grace of God without any merit or worthiness on our part.

As he studied his open Bible he learnt to know God as his gracious Father in Christ Jesus. Luther came to know, as millions of others, that God, to be God, must be perfect in His holiness and just in all His dealings with man.

How can we face this God when Scripture declares in Ecclesiastes 7:20, <sup>20</sup> ***For there is not a just man on earth who does good And does not sin.*** Our own conscience bears witness to this truth. We know that our hands are unclean and the thoughts of our heart are sinful. Therefore we are possessed with a fear which makes us hide from God. And we have every reason to be afraid as we observe justice being executed by an unseen hand and see proofs that ***"the way of the unfaithful is hard"*** as we read in Prov. 13:15.

This leads many people into despair. The ancients had their Furies, who pursued the criminal till justice was meted out, and the Haitians have their voodoo cults, which try to spirit away the gods of vengeance.

Furthermore, Luther himself discovered and experienced in his own life that the success of man's plans and man's doing of the prescribed good works do not satisfy even man himself, because no one is ever sure that he has achieved the goal of perfection, so that he can say that in every detail he has done the will of God.

Pharisaical regulations and the church's penance program taught that man by his own achievements had to "merit" and win the goodwill and favour of God. Some people, so the church declared, had a superabundance of good works to their credit, which others could tap to make up for their own deficiencies and thus to be made acceptable to God. All this made man's worthiness a prerequisite to salvation.

Man therefore supposed he could demand God's favour if he fasted twice a week and gave tithes of all he possessed.<sup>4</sup> In all this man looked at himself with self-satisfaction and did not throw himself helplessly at the foot of the cross to plead for mercy.

Going into the Scripture, especially the Epistle to the Romans, Martin Luther discovered that this righteous and just God, of whom he always had been terribly afraid, was His gracious Father, who "*so loved the world,*" all mankind, "*that He sent His only-begotten Son*" into this world of sin to atone for man's many transgressions by dying on the cross in our place that thereby we might be forgiven.

Jesus' death blotted out all our sins. This put salvation on an altogether different plane. Salvation is ours as a free gift of God's grace. We are saved, but never by our achievements. We cannot come into God's court and maintain that we have fulfilled His every law or even just one law. We can come only because Christ died for us "*while we were yet sinners.*"<sup>5</sup> Only if we come just as we are and throw ourselves completely upon the mercy of God can we be sure of salvation, for "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.*"<sup>6</sup>

This was new to Martin Luther. The Christian world in which he lived made man's reconciliation dependent, at least in part, upon man's good works. God's grace smiled on those, who had done penance or purchased indulgences.

But in the Epistle to the Romans Luther discovered that we are acquitted in God's judgment solely and alone because Jesus made full atonement for our sins. Therefore our salvation has been achieved only by God's grace. This discovery led Luther to write in his Small Catechism: "*I believe that Jesus Christ ... saved and redeemed me, a lost and condemned person. He has freed me from sin, death, and the power of the devil - not with silver or gold, but with His holy and precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. All this He has done that I may be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.*"

God has done all this in and through Christ. His love did not want us to perish. This truth emphasises that salvation is guaranteed unconditionally through the cross. No matter what we have done, God's grace in Christ wipes away all

sins and remembers them no more. This is Martin Luther's second contribution: he uncompromisingly insisted that we are saved by grace alone — "Sola Gratia."

### 3. Sola Fide — "By Faith Alone"

God's grace saves. Jesus died for all. Everyone born of woman has been redeemed by the cross of Calvary. Yet countless multitudes are lost, and will never see eternal life in that glory where God dwells. Why, tell me — why?

Martin Luther learned from Scripture this third all-important truth: We are saved by believing that Christ died for our sins. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-9, ***"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. And again, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."***<sup>7</sup>

This faith puts us into the right relationship with God. This faith too is a gift of God's grace. Scripture says in 1 Corinthians 12:3, ***no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.*** And again, ***"Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."***<sup>8</sup> Only if God turns us shall we be turned.<sup>9</sup>

However, many people stubbornly reject this offer of grace and will not accept God's salvation, finished on the cross and proffered in the Gospel. They are lost, then, because they will not believe. To his persecutors Stephen said, ***"You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you."***<sup>10</sup> And to the people of Jerusalem Jesus said in Matthew 23:37, ***"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"***

Luther discovered that this faith makes each believer a priest of God. Each and every believer has free access to the heart of the gracious Father in Christ. We need no intermediary to speak for us to God. Any hour of the day we can come individually to God in prayer, and for Christ's sake God hears our requests. This faith hides completely behind Jesus, who has reconciled us to God.

As believers we seek to please God with a consecrated service of appreciation. Therefore the believer, irrespective of their station in life, be they a banker or production line worker, store keeper or day labourer, housewife or typist, is rich in good works, which can be done only through Spirit-created faith.

In loving obedience we ask daily, *“Lord, what will You have me to do?”* There is no fear in this obedience. The joy of forgiveness in Christ’s blood creates in us the desire to dedicate our lives to God whose grace has done so much for us.

In this saving faith we share with all believers the one hope that after the pilgrimage of life we shall be forever with the Lord. This hope enables us to bear the burden of the years with greater ease. We rise above every trying situation with the confidence that God is with us. We live daily in His grace, which has transformed our thinking and our mode of living.

Without fear we face death, for we know that *“there is now no condemnation”*<sup>11</sup> for them who are Christ’s own. Whoever believes in Him cannot perish but has everlasting life. Only faith in Christ gives us this hope and certainty. And this faith is nourished and strengthened through Word and Sacrament.

This is the third great truth which Martin Luther discovered through the Scriptures: Sola Fide — “by faith alone,” faith in Christ Crucified, we are saved.

These truths, taught and emphasised by Martin Luther, made him different from most of those who preceded him, just as this faith made Paul the outstanding apostle of the first Christian church. In fact, Luther learnt these truths through his study of Paul’s epistles. And he believed in the Scriptures as the only authority which could tell him how to be saved.

Scripture to this day is the sole and only authority which makes us wise to salvation. The Scriptures tell you and me that God’s grace alone prompted Him to send His Son into the world to redeem us through His atoning cross and that only faith in this Saviour opens the door of heaven to us and gives us eternal life in glory.

This Book we must keep open and follow; then we shall never lose the way to life eternal. In the Scriptures alone we find Jesus, who took upon Himself the

sins of the whole world and made full atonement for them by the shedding of His blood.

There we learn that we are saved by grace without the deeds of the Law through faith in Christ Crucified. The Gospel is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.<sup>12</sup> Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> 2 Peter 1:16

<sup>2</sup> 2 Peter 1:19-21

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 5:1

<sup>4</sup> cf. Luke 18:12

<sup>5</sup> Rom. 5:8

<sup>6</sup> 2 Cor. 5:19

<sup>7</sup> Rom. 5:1

<sup>8</sup> Rom. 15:13

<sup>9</sup> Jer. 31:18

<sup>10</sup> Acts 7:51

<sup>11</sup> Romans 8:1

<sup>12</sup> Romans 1:16