

# Luther the Leader

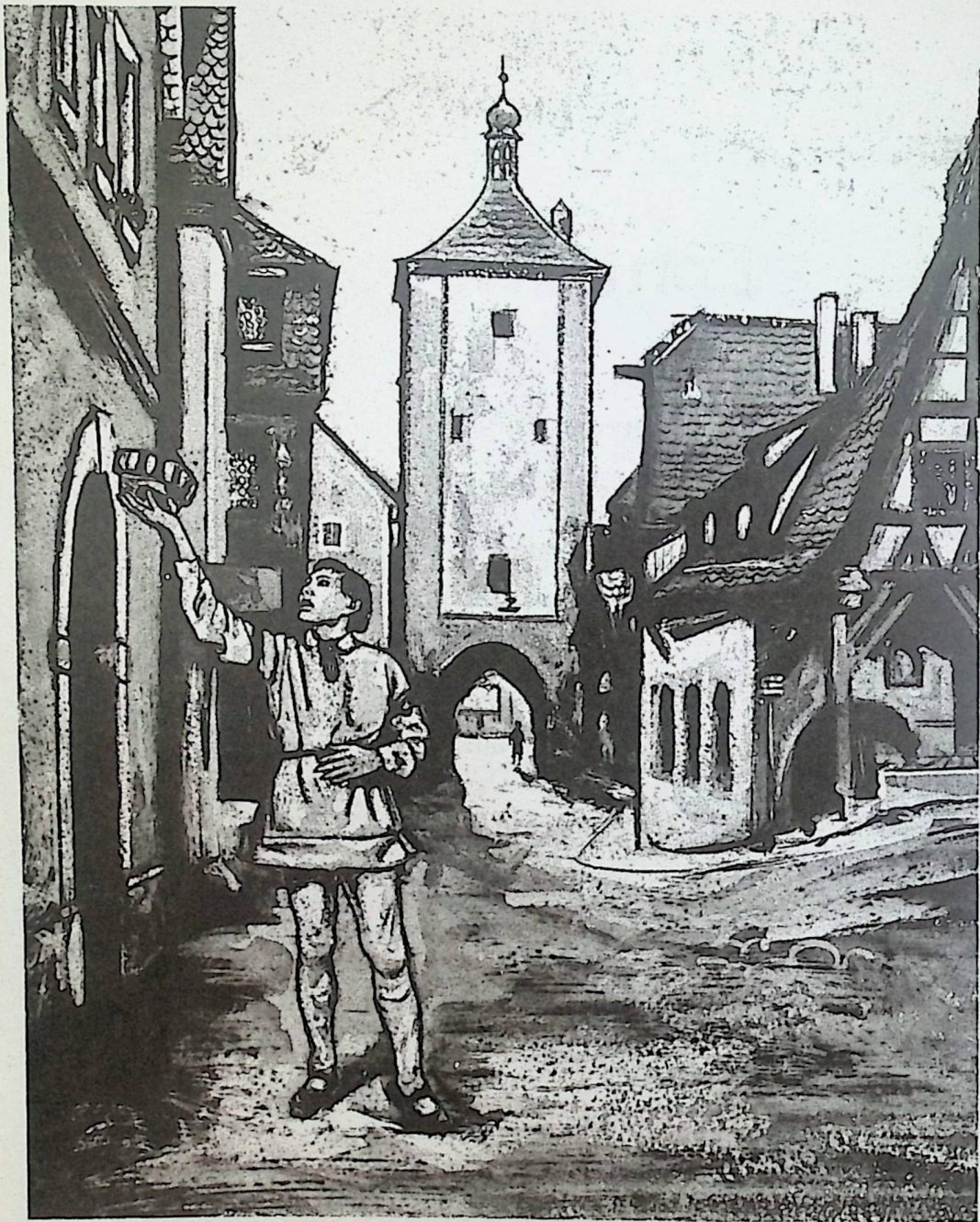
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While he was a student at Magdeburg, Martin Luther found it necessary to beg for food from door to door.



## Schooldays for Martin

ONE crisp morning the church bells in the small village of Eisleben began to toll.

The people remembered that this was Saint Martin's Day, and a special mass would be said in the church for all who wished to attend. As the bell pealed, a stout rugged man strode toward the church, his simple clothes showing that he was a peasant.

The narrow street was unpaved. Recent rains had left many puddles divided by strips of mud, all of which the man tried to avoid by stepping on stones that had been laid down at the worst places. The street was lined with cabins, and through cracks in the walls wisps of smoke escaped, showing that families within were busy preparing breakfast. It was November 11. Winter had already laid its chilling hand on the village. Distant mountains were wearing white crowns.

"Good morning, Neighbor Hans." One of the villagers spoke from a cabin doorway.

"Good morning." A smile broke over Hans Luther's honest face.

"You seem to be on some important errand," remarked the villager. For Hans had not stopped to visit as he usually did.

"That I am." Hans paused just long enough to blurt out the news he was bursting to tell. "I am hurrying to the church to arrange for a christening."

The neighbor held out his hand. "Mighty glad to hear it, Hans. Was it a boy or a girl? How is Margaret?"

"It was a boy, William. As fine a baby boy as you've ever seen. Our first-born, you know. We will name him Martin in honor of the day. Margaret is doing well. Now, if you will excuse me, I must go and see the priest."

Hans hurried down the street.

Thus was born, on Saint Martin's Eve, 1483, the child who would grow up to become known the world around as Martin Luther, the great German Reformer.

Little Martin never remembered his birthplace, for when he was six months old his parents moved to Mansfeld. Being a younger son in a family of many children, Hans Luther had received little from his father. However, he was a hard-working man and eager to get ahead. In Mansfeld he began working in the mines. Through the years he saved his money and bought first one furnace, then in the years to come, several more, and these gave him a steady income. But those more prosperous years were still far in the future when Martin was growing up in Mansfeld.

Martin did not have a carefree childhood. His parents were very strict with him. One day he returned from the village with a small nut in his hand he had picked up.

"Where did you get that nut?" asked his mother severely.

Martin could not tell, though he tried his best to remember. Out came the stick, and his little legs were bleeding before his mother put it down again. His father was equally severe. Of course, both Hans and Margaret Luther were doing what they thought was best for their son.

Hans was eager for little Martin to learn to read and write. A school was located on a high hill overlooking Mansfeld, a hill far too steep for Luther's little legs to manage, so Hans would put his first-born on his shoulders, and up they would go. In the evenings Hans would stop at the school and get his boy.

Many times when nearing home Luther would meet his mother returning from the forest surrounding the village with a great bundle of wood on her back. The counts of Mansfeld, who owned thou-



sands of acres of forest land, were willing for the peasants to pick up the dead wood. But woe to any unlucky man caught cutting a living tree. His life was taken to pay for the wood.

Martin was a good student, and would have made progress in any school where the teacher taught well. One Friday afternoon, after attending the school for several years, Martin was walking slowly homeward with two or three companions. Hearing heavy footsteps behind him, he turned and saw his father and some of the older miners overtaking them.

"Well, son, how did the lessons go today?" Hans asked.

"Father, it is hard to say. The master is very discouraged with us. He says we will never learn the Latin."

"That should not trouble you, Martin. You have learned to read our German very well, and surely Latin cannot be much more difficult."

Hans Luther laughed and brought his hand down with a resounding smack on his son's shoulder. Martin winced and moved away. His father's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"Ha, what is the matter, son? Has the master been beating you?"

"Yes, Father."

"How many times has he beaten you today?"

"Fifteen," Martin replied in a very low tone. "But, Father, it is all because of the Latin." Friday was always punishment day in German schools at that time. All the mistakes of a week were recorded, and on Friday the pupils were beaten according to the total number.

Near their home Martin saw his mother, heavily laden, walking out of the forest. Ordinarily he would have hastened to help her, but not this evening. His shoulders were too sore from the beating he had received.

Inside the cabin Hans removed Martin's shirt and looked at the lines flaming across the poor shoulders. Without saying a word, he replaced the shirt.

That night after the children were all asleep, Hans and Margaret Luther talked over the situation.

"It is not that I think the master wrong in whipping the boys. Whipping is essential if they are to learn anything. But I do not think this teacher knows his business. There is an excellent school run by the Franciscan Brothers in Magdeburg. I think we would be wise to send him there."

"Would you be able to send him any money if he goes so far away?" Margaret asked anxiously.

"No, I fear not. With six other mouths to feed around our table every day, it takes all I can earn to care for them. Martin would have to beg for his food the same as the other scholars. But he is a bright lad, and he makes friends easily."

So it was decided that Martin should go over the hills to the Magdeburg school. Before he left, the pious Margaret knelt with him, praying that God would keep him and make him a wise and good man. Hans and Margaret Luther then walked to the edge of the village and set him on the road to Magdeburg. Before they parted, Margaret looked into the clear honest eyes of her boy and spoke words that he never forgot.

"Remember, Martin, if the world smiles not on you and me, it is our own fault."

The parents stood watching him until a bend in the road hid him from sight. Martin felt very lonely, trudging along the dusty forest road, a small bundle on his back containing a few clothes, half a loaf of bread, and a small cheese. He was fourteen years old.

The school at Magdeburg was a good one, and the teachers were both kind and thorough. One master in particular surprised Martin, for every morning when he entered the classroom he removed his hat and bowed deeply to the class. One of his fellow teachers asked him why he should do that to a group of ignorant children.

"Why?" replied the understanding master. "Who knows? In that classroom there may be boys who will become great scholars and write books that will influence the world. I do not bow to what they are now. I bow to their future."

Luther found the task of making a living very difficult. True, there were no school fees to pay, but it was a problem to find



enough food. Because the school was so large, the townspeople became weary of hearing the constant plea for food. As time went on, Luther received less and less. He became very thin and found it hard to think about his studies when he was so often very hungry. When Hans Luther heard of this he arranged for Martin to withdraw from Magdeburg and go to the village of Eisenach, where the Luthers had relatives who might be able to help the boy.

Alas, Martin found Eisenach no easier at first. His relatives had a large family and could spare little food for him. But Luther possessed a fine tenor voice, and it was not long before he became the leader of a group of scholars who went through the town each evening singing for their supper. Often they were made welcome, but sometimes they met with harsh words and were sent away empty.

"Just wait," Martin remarked one day when the singers had received less food than usual. "Christmas is coming, and then people will be kind. Also, we can sing lovely carols at Christmas time."

One evening not long after, the group were singing at the door of a farmer whom they knew was quite wealthy. In the midst of their song, the door was flung open. Out came the farmer, shouting at them and waving something that looked like a club.

"Rascals! Rascals!" he roared, "where are you?"

The boys took to their heels and fled down the road, their gowns flapping around their skinny legs. Luther, running behind, heard the man following them. He also heard some of the words the farmer was shouting.

"Stop!" he called to his friends. "That isn't a club he has in his hands. It's a big round sausage, and he is calling us to come and get it."

Ashamed of their fears, the boys returned and accepted the food from the hands of the burly farmer, who laughed at the trick he had played on them.

But for Luther life became even harder. His face grew thin. One day he felt he must find food, so he went alone from house to house begging. Three times he was turned away with harsh



words. Then he stood with empty hands and an empty stomach in front of a large imposing building. What should he do? Must he renounce his dream of gaining an education, return to Mansfeld, and work in the mines? How disappointed his father would be!

"Martin, someday you are going to be a lawyer."

Many times he had heard his father proudly repeat those words. Now he was defeated, and he knew it.

The door of the house before which he was standing opened. A motherly woman beckoned him to enter.

"Come," she said kindly. "I have something for you."

Gladly Martin stepped into the house. Madam Cotta led him to the kitchen and gave him all he could eat.

"I have watched you passing here several times," she said. "I have heard you singing with the other scholars. You have a good voice. I want you to come and live here. You can sing for us, and this will be your home."

To Martin it seemed a happy dream. The Cottas took him in and treated him as if he were their own son. His days of hunger were over. For two years he continued as a member of the family. The old worries about mastering the Latin were gone, for with enough to eat he became an excellent student. He could read, write, and speak Latin almost as well as his native German. He gained another accomplishment while living with the Cottas. They bought him a lute, and he learned to play it beautifully.

This experience helped Luther to believe that God loved and cared for him. However, he felt that most of his good fortune was the result of the intercession of the saints.

"It must have been Saint Martin who helped me," he would say to himself. "I was born on his day, and I received his name."

Martin finished all the classes offered at Eisenach and was ready for the University of Erfurt. The Cottas were sorry to see him go.

"Come back and see us again, son," they said as he left to pay a visit to his parents before enrolling at Erfurt.

"That I will. Never will I forget your kindness."

At Mansfeld he found his father well and prospering. He had been elected one of the town counselors. His two blast furnaces were

making money. Hans Luther was proud of his son as he took him around Mansfeld and introduced him to his friends.

"Remember, Martin," he said, as they parted once again. "I can help you this time. All your fees will be promptly paid, every necessary book will be bought, and you can give yourself wholly to your studies."

So over the hills Martin walked again, bound this time for the famous Erfurt University. The date was 1501, and Martin was eighteen years old.



## The Flash From Heaven

ONE never-to-be-forgotten day while Luther sat in the library of the Erfurt University, he opened a book he had never seen before. It was the entire Bible in Latin.

Often he had heard the priests chanting passages from the Bible, but now in his own two hands he held all the Word of God. He began to read. And the more he read the more absorbed he became. Hour after hour passed. Mealtime came and went, but he paid no attention. At length the librarian asked him to leave, for the library must be locked.

Luther returned to his room still lost in thought. He found his roommate staring at a pile of books.

"I am glad you came back," the roommate said impatiently. "I thought you were going to spend the night out."

"I have been in the library where I found a copy of the Holy Scriptures. Never have I seen such a Book! Have you read it?"

"No, I leave all such things for the priests and monks. It is their duty to read the Scriptures and tell us what to do."

"Today I have read about a child named Samuel and how God called him. Have you ever heard of him?"

"No, I never have. I am busy enough trying to get these books into my head without reading anything else."

Luther watched as his roommate simply stared at his pile of books, wondering when he would open one and begin to study.

At length the man picked up a book and hurled it across the room, exclaiming, "The word *study* and the word *stupid* come from the same root, and there is a close connection. The more you study the more stupid you become!" Luther tried to reason with him, but in vain.

From then on, Martin spent more and more time in the library becoming acquainted with the Scriptures. During services in the university chapel he would listen intently as different priests read portions of the Scriptures. He began to think more and more about God and about such things as life and death, eternity, and the fate of the wicked. He became concerned about his own sins, which he felt were unforgiven.

Painted on the wall of the church was a picture of a ship plowing through stormy seas. On the deck stood the pope grasping the helm. Grouped closely around him were cardinals and bishops. The deck was crowded with monks and nuns. In the water struggled hundreds of common people, drowning. Here and there a monk was throwing a plank to some poor soul sinking beneath the waves.

Ah, thought Luther as he studied the painting. It is evident that there is only one safe place, and that is in the church. If I would save my soul, I must become a monk.

During the holidays Luther visited his home. He was received as an honored guest by his parents, brothers, and sisters. Many were the long talks he had with his father and mother, relating his experiences in the university.

"Do you know, Mother, what I found one day? A copy of the Scriptures, the Book of God! Never have I seen anything like it!"

"What did you read in that Book?" his mother inquired.

"Oh, many things. But the story I shall never forget was the one about the call of Samuel. Do you know that story, Mother?"

"Yes, Martin. My mother told it to me when I was still a child."

"When I read it," Martin said, "I wondered what I would do or say if God called me. Would I be willing to answer, 'Speak, for thy servant heareth'? May I be ready, even as Samuel was, to obey the voice of God."



"Amen," Martin's mother responded. But the father remained silent. Martin could see that he was displeased. Hans Luther was a Christian, but he had no use for the thousands of monks who thronged the monasteries, did little work, and expected the poor peasants to feed them.

Back at the university, Martin plunged again into his studies. So diligently did he apply himself that he was seized with a dangerous sickness. For days his fellow students expected to hear of his death. An aged priest went to visit him.

Taking Luther's wasted hand in his own and stroking it, the priest said softly, "My dear scholar, take heart, you shall not die of this sickness. God will make you one who will comfort many others." Luther never forgot those prophetic words.

Martin received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1502. For two and a half more years he continued his studies. He became the top scholar in the university, and his teachers proudly predicted a brilliant future for him. When before he was twenty-two he received the Master of Arts degree there was a torchlight procession as the students marched through the city. On all sides shouts of greeting and applause were heard—"Hail, Master! Hail, Master!"

Knowing that his father wanted him to become a lawyer, Martin next began to study law. But his heart was deeply troubled. He could not forget the child Samuel. Also, his sins loomed up larger and larger in his mind. He confided all the turmoil of his heart to Alexis, his closest friend, from whom he kept no secrets.

One morning on entering his lecture room (for he was now both teaching and studying), he was told that Alexis had been killed during the night.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Luther.

"Unfortunately, it is only too true."

"I shall not conduct my classes today," Luther announced. "I must find out what has happened to my friend."

He went from the lecture room to the house where his friend lay dead. No one knew just what had happened. Someone said he had been slain by robbers, another that he had been struck by lightning. Luther gazed upon the body of his friend.



"Suppose it had been I," he said to himself. "Suppose I had been summoned last night to the judgment bar of God. What hope would I have had of satisfying my Judge? None, absolutely none."

From then on there was no peace of mind for Luther. He must save his soul by any means possible. Nothing else mattered. But first of all, he must talk with his father. He knew how Hans Luther had built his hopes on his son's becoming a lawyer, and how bitterly disappointed he would be when he learned that Martin was no longer interested in studying law.

During one brief holiday the young man made his way over the hills to Mansfeld. His parents were delighted to see him. Hans Luther felt the respect that ignorant men often feel toward someone who is educated. This he showed in his dealings with Martin. It was "Doctor Luther" this, and "Doctor Luther" that, until Martin could stand it no longer.

"Oh, Father, I am still your son. Please call me Martin."

"Ah, but you are a great scholar now, and I find joy in paying you respect."

One morning Martin told his mother that he wanted to enter a monastery.

"But, Mother, how can I tell father about it?" he asked.

"Martin, you must not think of it. You have no idea what high hopes he has for you. It would break his heart."

"But, Mother, if God calls, how can I refuse? Should I not tell him before I return?"

"Martin, wait at least two years. Already your father has spoken secretly with the mayor, whose daughter Catherine would make you a lovely wife. She has always admired you, and I think a wedding can be arranged. Her father is wealthy, you know."

"Very well, Mother. I will follow your advice. But it is with a heavy heart and a troubled conscience that I go back to my studies."

Martin set out for Erfurt, troubled because of the conflict between his heart's desire and his feeling of duty to his parents. On the third day of the journey a terrible storm came up at dusk, finding him far from the sheltering walls of the city. He had been so occupied with his thoughts that he had not noticed the rapidly



blackening sky until the rumble of thunder caused him to look for shelter, but none was in sight. Suddenly the rushing storm was upon him.

Pulling his cloak around him, he struggled on. Great clouds of dust were whipped up by the wind. The rain fell in torrents, drenching him to the skin. To Luther the flashes of lightning and the rumble of the thunder were evidences that God was angry with him. He feared he was about to be destroyed.

Suddenly a bolt of lightning struck the road just a few feet in front of him. The flash blinded him, and the crash deafened him. Falling to his knees, he held up his hands to heaven, and amid the roar of the tempest made a solemn vow.

"Oh, save me, Saint Anna, and I will become a monk."

The storm passed, and Luther decided not to go any farther in the blackness of the night. In his wet clothes he curled up on the grass and slept fitfully until dawn.

In the cold gray morning Luther knelt beside the road and prayed—not to God as his heavenly Father, nor to Jesus as his



**Martin Luther's life is truly an inspiration to every Christian boy and girl. He was a pioneer among the Christians in his age and remains a leader of Christians in our age. Luther stands out among men in history as one who would not compromise his conscience. His unbending desire to live for Christ and truth brought him into conflict with the princes and leaders of the world. The stories of his consistent witness will inspire your children to be faithful to God at any cost.**

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