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**“I have held many things
in my hands, and I have
lost them all; but whatever
I have placed in God’s
hands, that I still possess.”**

—MARTIN LUTHER

INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther. To most Protestants and Evangelicals, a legendary reformer who rescued the gospel from the clutches of the papacy. To most Catholics, a divisive heretic who denied the way of salvation.

The reality, of course, is more complex. Martin Luther was a great man—but he was a man. He was subject to the same frailties and faults you and I are. He was a passionate man, experiencing everything from the most luminous highs all the way through to the deepest and darkest sorrows. Verbally, he could be vicious toward his enemies, as well as his friends—as those who disagreed with him on the theological significance of the Lord’s supper knew all too well. And if that weren’t enough, there’s the alleged anti-Semitism of his later years, his more bizarre comments on marriage, and a thousand other things besides.

Yet this was the man that God used to recapture the gospel. He restored the Word of God, the Bible, to the center of Christian life and worship. He reestablished the importance of family, the value of music, and the dignity of human labor. But most significantly, he recovered the truth that a person’s justification in the eyes of God comes by grace alone through faith alone.

Luther was—and still is—controversial. But the controversies hardly do the man justice. We need to get a sense of the world in which he lived. We need to grasp the cultural climate and the state of the church at that time in order to see Luther for who he really was—and to understand what the legacy of the Reformation means for us today.



PART I
BEFORE
THE FIRE

Martin Luther is popularly credited as the man who launched the Reformation of the church. He was a powerful driving force, of course. But the real story is more complicated. The seeds of discontent had been sown long before he came onto the scene.

By the time Luther came of age in the early 16th century, organized Christianity bore little resemblance to its earliest days. The church had abandoned its prophetic voice and become a political force, using power to manipulate the wills of men. The call to holiness was abandoned and those responsible for shepherding God's people more closely resembled haters of God than His servants. The finished work of Jesus Christ at Calvary had been replaced with the ritual of the Mass, sacrificing the Lord anew whenever the congregation gathered. The people's hope was not in the righteousness of Christ alone, but in their own ability to meet the commands of God.





Deceivers and swindlers wandered the streets peddling indulgences, and with them the hope that “as soon as the gold in the casket rings, the rescued soul to heaven springs.” But that was a lie, a false hope designed to fill the Church’s coffers and finance the building of St. Peter’s Basilica.

False hope may have built cathedrals, but it was tearing down the souls of men and women across Germany and the rest of Europe.



The Bible, written by and to the common man, was out of the common man's grasp. Only the clergy could read it. Only the Roman Church could interpret it. And those who attempted to put it in the hands of the common man were excommunicated or executed for their troubles.

The light of the gospel had almost been extinguished.

Almost.

This was not what the Apostles intended for the church. It wasn't what the early church fathers intended. Nor was it what *Jesus* intended. Jesus desired the church to be a city on a hill, a light in the darkness, a kingdom of priests and ambassadors spreading good news of great joy through the entire world. And long before Luther was born, there were already men and women in the church who knew something was wrong. They knew that the church needed to be renewed—that it needed to be *reformed*.

