

Luther's Conversion

By Horatius Bonar

When first awakened to a sense of sin, Luther became unspeakably troubled. Once and again deep anguish took hold of his soul, and it seemed as if he would sink under it. On one occasion he had been conversing with a friend upon the things of God. No sooner had the conversation ended, than the truths of which they had been speaking struck home with awful power to the tossed soul of Luther. He left the room and sought the nearest chamber to give vent to the feelings of his bursting heart. He threw himself upon the bed and prayed aloud in agony; repeating over and over again these words of the apostle, "He hath shut them all up in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon all" (Rom. 11:32).

Luther now began to try to make himself holy. He fasted for days together. He shut himself up alone in his cold cell. He passed many nights, sometimes for weeks, without sleep. He read, he studied, he prayed, he wept, he watched, he strove, but all in vain! He found himself as far from holiness and peace as ever! If ever anyone could have gained heaven by his own merits, Luther would have gained it. To those around him, he seemed the holiest man alive. But the light of the law showed him that within all was vile. His soul cried out for rest, but he found it not, for he was seeking it not in God's way, but in a way of his own. He wanted to be sure that his sins were forgiven him, for he felt that until he knew this, he could not have peace. But his fear increased upon him, and he knew not what to do, nor which way to turn. He saw everything that he thought and did to be *sin*, and how could he rest until he knew that all was forgiven! His friends told him to do good works and that would satisfy the justice of God. Miserable comforters!

"What good works," said he, "can proceed out of a heart like mine; how can I, with works like these, stand before a holy Judge."

The terrors of the fiery law compassed him about and consumed his soul. His "sore ran in the night and ceased not." He saw nothing in God but the angry Judge. He had not yet learned the riches of His grace through Jesus Christ.

His bodily health gave way. "A wounded spirit, who can bear." He wasted away. He became thin and pale. His eyes, which were peculiarly bright, looked wild with despair; and death seemed just at hand. In this state he was visited by an old priest. His name was Staupitz. He pitied the dying monk, and all the more so when he was told the cause of his suffering, for he had himself passed through the same conflict. But he had found the peace of Christ in his soul, and was therefore well fitted to give counsel to Luther.

"It is in vain," said Luther to him, "that I make promises to God; sin is always too strong for me."

"Oh, my friend," said Staupitz, "I have often made vows myself, but I never could keep them; I now make no more vows; for if God will not be merciful to me for Christ's sake, I cannot stand before Him with all my vows and works."

Luther made known to him all his fears. He spoke of God's justice, God's holiness, God's sovereign majesty. How could he stand before such a God?

"Why," said his aged friend, "do you distress yourself with these thoughts? Look to the wounds of Jesus, to the blood which he has shed for you; it is there that you will see the mercy of God. Cast yourself into the arms of the Savior. Trust in Him — in the righteousness of His life — in the atoning sacrifice of His death. Do not shrink away from Him. God is not against you; it is only you who are averse from God. Listen to the Son of God. He became man to assure you of the divine favor."

Still Luther was dark. He thought he had not repented properly, and asked, "How can I dare believe in the favor of God, so long as there is in me no real conversion? I must be changed

before He can receive me.”

He is told that there can be no real conversion so long as a man fears God as a stern judge. “There is,” said his friend, “no true repentance but that which begins in the love of God and righteousness. That which some fancy to be the end of repentance is only its beginning. If you wish to be really converted, do not try these penances. Love Him who has first loved you.”

Luther listens and is glad. The day breaks, new light pours in. “Yes,” said he, “it is Jesus Christ that comforts me so wonderfully by these sweet and healing words.” *In order to true repentance we must love God!* He had never heard this before. Taking this truth as his guide, he went to the Scriptures. He turned up all the passages which speak of repentance and conversion; and these two words which were formerly his terror, now become precious and sweet. The passages which used to alarm him, now “seemed to run to me from all sides, to smile, to spring up and play around me. Formerly I tried to love God, but it was all force; and there was no word so bitter to me as that of repentance. Now there is none more pleasant. Oh, how blessed are all God’s precepts when we read them not in books only, but in the precious wounds of the Savior.”

Thus he learned that we are not forgiven because we love God, but we love God because we are forgiven. We cannot repent, we cannot love, until we have known and believed the love that God hath for us. “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and gave His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

Still Luther’s darkness at times returned. His sins again went over his soul, and hid the face of God.

“Oh, my sin! My sin! My sin!” cried he, one day to his aged friend. “What would you have?” said Staupitz. “Would you like if your sin was not *real*? Remember, if you have only the *appearance* of a sinner, you must be content with the mere *appearance* of a Savior. But learn this, that Jesus Christ is the Savior of those who are real and great sinners, and deserving of utter condemnation.”

“Look at the wounds of Christ,” said he, on another occasion, “and you will see there shining clearly the purpose of God towards men. We cannot understand God out of Christ.”

But Luther’s peace sometimes gave way, and his fears returned. He was taken ill and brought down to the gates of death. Terror again took hold on him. Death seemed full of gloom. It was a fearful thing to meet a holy God! An old monk visited him in his sickbed, and in him God gave him another comforter and guide. Sitting at his bedside he repeated this sentence of the Creed, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” These words, thus simply and sweetly brought to mind, were like balm to the soul of Luther. “I believe,” said he to himself, “the forgiveness of sins.” “Ah, but,” said the old man, “we are not merely to believe that there is forgiveness for David or Peter; the command of God is that we believe there is forgiveness for our own sins.” Luther’s spirit was revived. He found on this rock a sufficient resting place, and his soul rejoiced in the forgiving love of God.

Thus his weary soul found rest. He was now like a vessel that has reached its haven. No storm can reach or harm it. He was like the dove in the clefts of the rock. He was like the man who had reached the city of refuge. He found himself safe and at rest. *Jehovah his righteousness* was his song, and his joy. It was what he saw in Christ that gave him hope and confidence toward God, and not what he saw in himself. It was what he knew of Christ and His righteousness that took away all fear and filled his soul with peace. He believed and was forgiven. Nor did he reckon it presumption to count himself a forgiven soul. He gloried and rejoiced in this. He counted it one of the most grievous of all sins to doubt it. He saw that the gospel was intended to bring us forgiveness, and to assure us of it. He saw that whenever we really believe in the gospel, then that forgiveness is as completely and certainly ours as if we were already in heaven. This was the very life of Luther’s soul. It was this that made him so bold in the cause of Christ, in all his future life. He was assured of the favor of God, and that took away all fear of men.

There was one text of Scripture which seems to have been greatly blessed to him. It was very

frequently on his mind during his many struggles. It was the text which Paul quotes from Habakkuk, to prove that we are justified by faith alone: "The just shall live by faith."

Once, he was sent to Rome on some business, and he thought that good works done at Rome were better and had more merit than those done anywhere else. He was told that if he would crawl up a very long stair, called Pilate's staircase, on his bare knees, he would acquire a great stock of merit. With great earnestness he set himself to do this miserable penance. While he was crawling up the steps, he thought he heard a voice like thunder, saying aloud to him, "The just shall live by faith." Immediately he started from his knees, and stopped in the middle of the ascent. The words went to his soul like the voice of God reproving him for his folly. Filled with shame, he instantly left the place. He saw that it was not by his works that he was to save himself at all, far less by works such as these—"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us" (Titus 3:5).

At another time, he was appointed to lecture on divinity. After explaining the Psalms, he came to the Epistle to the Romans. In studying this he took great delight. He used to sit in his quiet cell for many hours with the Bible open before him, meditating on that Epistle. The seventeenth verse of the first chapter fixed his eye, and filled his whole thoughts: "The just shall live by faith." In this he saw that there was another life than that possessed by man in general, and that this life was the fruit of faith. In the midst of much darkness these simple words were "a lamp to his feet, and a light to his path." Clearer light soon dawned upon his soul, and through him the bright beams of the gospel shot forth upon the benighted nations of Europe. The conversion of Luther was the dawning of the Reformation.