

# VINTAGE Saints & Sinners

Martin Luther (1483-1543)

Reading  
with  
Leader's  
Guide

## EPIPHANY

I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that anything that I thought or did or prayed satisfied God. Certainly, and with intense grumbling (perhaps even blasphemy), I was angry with God and said, 'As if it were indeed not enough that miserable sinners who are eternally lost through original sin and are crushed again by every calamity through the Ten Commandments, God Himself adds pain to pain in the gospel by threatening us with His righteousness and wrath!'

At last, meditating day and night . . . by the mercy of God, I gave heed to the context of the words, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' Then I began to understand that the righteousness of God is . . . a gift of God, namely by faith . . . Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through gates that had been flung open. An entirely new side of the Scriptures opened itself to me . . . and I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the loathing with which before I had hated the term 'the righteousness of God'. Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. [I saw] the work of God, that is what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

*At the opening of this reading, Martin is frustrated and angry with himself and with God. What is causing these emotions? Have you ever felt this way? What was at the heart of your struggle?*

*Martin undergoes a dramatic change. How does this change happen? How would you describe Martin's new understanding of God? And of his own status and experience?*

*As you reflect upon yourself right now, would you say that your current view of God is more like Luther's first understanding—or his second? How do you feel about God?*

*Have you ever sensed that the gates of paradise had been flung open for you? What prompted that?*

## STRUGGLE

When we are alone, the worst and saddest things come to mind. We reflect in detail upon all sorts of evils. And if we have encountered adversity in our lives, we dwell upon it as much as possible, magnify it, think that no one is so unhappy as we are, and imagine the worst possible consequences. In short, when we are alone, we leap to conclusions, and we interpret everything in the worst light. On the other hand, we imagine that other people are very happy, and it distresses us that things go well with them and evil with us.

You say that the sins we commit every day offend God, and therefore we are not saints. To this I reply: Mother love is stronger than the filth and scabbiness on a child, and so the love of God toward us is stronger than the dirt that clings to us. . . . Rest assured that [Christ loves] you, the Father loves you, and the Holy Spirit, who is sent to you, loves you.

Everything that is done in the world is done by hope. No husbandman would sow one grain of corn, if he hoped not it would grow up and become seed; no bachelor would marry a wife, if he hoped not to have children; no merchant or tradesman would set himself to work, if he did not hope to reap benefit thereby, &c. How much more, then, does hope urge us on to everlasting life and salvation?

*What emotional insights does Luther share here? How does he speak to your own experience of loneliness? Of adversity? Of comparison to others? What encouragement does Martin give you?*

*"Everything that is done in the world is done by hope." Where do you see hope in the world? In your own life? How might hope shape your spiritual life?*

*In this next section, Martin Luther gives more practical pastoral advice. Listen for any counsel that speaks especially to you?*

## REMEDIES

- ACTIVITY & FRIENDSHIP

Undertake to do anything else that you are able—whether play or something else—just so that you free yourself from these thoughts...[Go] out to the fields and spread the manure; do something downright earthy...Engage in riding and hunting, and to seek the company of others who may be able to rejoice with [you] in a godly and honorable way....

Do not dwell on your own thoughts but listen to what other people have to say to you. For God has commanded [us] to comfort [one another], and it is His will that the afflicted should receive such consolation as God's very own. Be merry with others, for gladness and good cheer, when decent and proper, are the best medicine. I myself, who have spent a good part of my life in sorrow and gloom, now seek and find pleasure wherever I can.

When you are sad... and when melancholy threatens to get the upper hand, say, 'Arise! I must play a song unto the Lord ... for the Scriptures teach us that it pleases Him to hear a joyful song...' Then begin striking the keys and singing in accompaniment, as David and Elisha did, until your sad thoughts vanish."

*Read out the phrases or sentences that resonate with you.*

*Does any of this advice sound like advice a friend would give to you? or that's fresh and current today?*

- SCRIPTURE

Let us learn, therefore, in great and horrible terrors, when our conscience feels nothing but sin and judges that God is angry with us, and that Christ has turned His face from us, not to follow the sense and feeling of our own heart, but to stick to the Word of God. We also labor by the Word of God that we may set at liberty those that are entangled, and bring them to the pure doctrine of faith, and hold them there.

Without a doubt, you will not be able to burn a stronger incense or fragrance against the devil than involving yourself in God's commandments and words and speaking, singing, or thinking about them.

It was no joke or laughing matter for [Noah and his family] to live shut up in the ark for so long, to see the endless masses of rain, to be tossed about by the waves and to drift. In these circumstances, there was the feeling that God had forgotten them. All their circumstances compelled them to debate whether God was favorably inclined and wanted to remember them. Therefore, although they overcame these hardships, they did not overcome them without awful affliction. Let us, then, remember that this story sets before us an example of faith, perseverance and patience in order that those who have the divine promise may not only learn to believe it but may also realize that they need perseverance.

You have the Apostle who shows to you a garden, or paradise, which is full of comfort, when he says: 'Whatever was written, was written for our instruction, so that through patience and the consolation of the Scriptures we might have hope.'

*What tough emotional experiences is Martin addressing here? What have you felt for yourself?*

*What counsel does Martin give?*

*How might the biblical story of Noah and his family help you or someone you know?*

- PRAYER

God wants us to pray, and he wants to hear our prayers—not because we are worthy, but because he is merciful.

Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance. It is laying hold of His willingness.

You must learn to call on the Lord. Don't sit all alone or lie on the couch, shaking your head and letting your thoughts torture you.

Don't worry about how to get out of your situation or brood about your terrible life, how miserable you feel, and what a bad person you are. Instead, say, "Get a grip on yourself, you lazy bum! Fall on your knees, and raise your hands and eyes toward heaven. Read a psalm. Say the Lord's Prayer, and tearfully tell God what you need.

Prayer is a very precious medicine, one that helps and never fails.

No one can believe how powerful prayer is and what it can effect, except those who have learned it by experience. Whenever I have prayed earnestly, I have been heard and have obtained more than I prayed for. God sometimes delays, but He always comes.

What does Martin say about prayer? Is there anything here that is new for you? That you'd like to believe? Think of a time when you were brooding about your "terrible life." What do you think Martin would've said to you then?

As you hear the next reading, listen to Martin as if he were a friend speaking directly to you. Imagine the pictures that come up for you. Try to see the scenes he describes. Be aware of the feelings that arise as he speaks.

- NATURE

*Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of them by being anxious can add one cubit to his stature?* You see, God is making the birds our schoolmasters and teachers. It is a great and abiding disgrace to us that in the Gospel a helpless sparrow should become a theologian and a preacher to the wisest of men, and daily should emphasize this to our eyes and ears, as if he were saying to us: "Look, you miserable man! You have house and home, money and property. Every year you have a field full of grain and other plants of all sorts, more than you ever need. Yet you cannot find peace, and you are always worried about starving. If you do not know that you have supplies and cannot see them before your very eyes, you cannot trust God to give you food for one day. Though we are innumerable, none of us spends his living days worrying. Still God feeds us every day..."

Every day you see these illustrations before your very eyes, how God nourishes and feeds everything that lives and grows from the earth, clothes and adorns it so beautifully. Now let these illustrations persuade you to lay aside your anxiety and your unbelief and to remember that you are Christians and not heathen. Such anxiety and greed are appropriate to heathen, who do not know God or care about Him. It is really idolatry', as St. Paul says .... Since you are Christians, he says, 'you dare not doubt that your Father is well aware of your need for all this, of the fact that you have a belly that needs food and drink and a body that needs clothing. If He did not know it, you would have reason to be concerned and anxious about how to provide for yourselves. But since He does know it, He will not forsake you. He is faithful and willing to take special care of you Christians, because, as has been said, He cares for the birds of the air as well. So forget your anxieties, since you cannot accomplish anything by them. It does not depend upon your anxiety but upon His knowledge and concern: 'If nothing grew in the field unless we were anxious about it, we would all have died in our cradles; and during the night, while we are lying asleep, nothing could grow. Indeed, even by worrying ourselves to death we could not make a single blade of grass grow in' the field. We really ought to see and understand that God gives everything without any anxiety on our part....

## THEOLOGICAL HORIZONS

*What did you hear in this long passage? How did you feel?*

*What does Martin want to tell you about anxiety? How does this fit with your own understanding of anxiety?*

*Think of someone in the grip of anxiety. How might they hear this reading?*

*If you were in a conversation with Martin Luther, what would you say to him? What would you ask?*

*How has these readings changed your view of Martin Luther?*

*What have you found valuable for your own life?*