

Prologue: Here I Sit

The Crisis of Summer 1545

In the summer of 1545 Martin Luther was sixty-one years old and well-known throughout Europe. He was one of the five most famous people alive, three of the others being kings (Charles V of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire, Francis I of France, Henry VIII of England) and one a pope (Paul III). This was quite an achievement for a man whose grandfather had been a peasant and whose father had started out in life as a copper miner.

Luther was also a survivor. He had been living now for twenty-five years as a monk excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church, and for twenty-four years as a person under the imperial ban, a death sentence if he came into the presence of the emperor or persons loyal to him. This death sentence—which Luther expected at any point to be carried out—greatly limited his ability to travel. At first, it had caused him to be very cautious about making any long-term commitments.

But in 1525, Luther had married a former nun named Katherine von Bora. They had become the parents of six children, four of whom were still living. Johannes, or Hans, the oldest son named for Luther's father and godfather, was now old enough to travel with his father on the trips he could make in the territory of Saxony. Marriage

had surprised Luther; he said that he did it to spite the pope, but within a short time he was singing the praises both of marriage in general and of his remarkable wife Katie.

The reform set off by his protest had been reasonably successful. Supported by Luther's practical and warm theological work, the "Lutheran" version of the Christian faith had spread over northern Europe. Churches that stemmed from his teaching were now predominant in most of northern Germany and in Scandinavia. People were reading Luther these days even south of the Alps in places such as Venice.¹

Daily life brought not only delights of family and many festivals, but also work and friendship. Luther had taught the Bible at Wittenberg since 1512, and he was now near completion of his largest project ever—*Lectures on Genesis*—which had taken over ten years to complete and would be published in many volumes.² A complete edition of his early Latin works was being published, and he was on his way to being "the most published author of the century."³

He had good, true, and long-standing friends in Wittenberg: the brilliant scholar and his frequent collaborator Philip Melancthon, the town pastor and good friend John Bugenhagen, and the local painter and perennial Burgomeister Lucas Cranach the Elder. At a short distance lived old and trusted friends who now led the churches of the Reformation in major towns—Nicholas von Amsdorf, the bishop in Naumburg, and Justus Jonas, the pastor in Halle. Another friend, George Spalatin, had died that January. He had been Luther's go-between at the court in the early and dangerous days and in later

1. On this matter, see Thomas A. Brady and Heiko Oberman, eds., *Itinerarium Italicum: The Profile of the Italian Renaissance in the Mirror of Its European Transformations* (Leiden: Brill, 1976).
2. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* in *Luther's Works* (American Edition), Volumes 1–8, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958–66). Hereafter cited as *LW*.
3. Martin Brecht, "Martin Luther" in Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (New York: Oxford, 1996), 462.

life served as the pastor of Altenburg. Perhaps Spalatin's death seemed the beginning of the end of a circle that had worked so well and stood together so long.

But for all those blessings and achievements, Luther was deeply discouraged that summer. Some of this may have been physical; his health had been deteriorating since 1537. He suffered a terrible attack of kidney stones in late June, so intense that he told Amsdorf: "My torturer, the stone, would have killed me on St. John's Day, had God not decided differently. I prefer death to such a tyrant."⁴

Some cause for concern came from the news that reached Wittenberg about the plans of the pope and of the emperor. The long-awaited Council of Trent had opened early that year. It was clear that under Paul III the Roman Church had a serious and effective leader far more ready and competent to take on the Reformation than his predecessors had been. Luther at this time was ridiculing the council and the years that it had taken the Curia to agree to hold one, but he had no illusions that the issues he had raised would get a sympathetic hearing.

Charles V was in the process of making peace with Suleiman I, the Turkish sultan of the Ottoman Empire. The threat of expanding Turkish power (into Hungary in 1526 and even to the gates of Vienna in 1529) had often saved the Lutherans in the past. Charles needed the support of their princes for unified military action. But now it seemed that Charles—the most powerful ruler that Europe had seen in centuries—might finally be able to turn his attention to ending the religious divisions. This he was determined to do, by negotiated agreement if possible but by war if necessary. Others might have grown complacent about the danger in the past quarter

4. "Letter to Nicholas von Amsdorf" (July 9, 1545), in *LW* 50 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 267. St. John's day is not December 27 (St. John the Apostle) but June 24 (the Feast of John the Baptist).

century. Luther had stood face-to-face with the emperor in Worms in 1521 and never forgot the anger of that prince toward him nor underestimated his resolve to crush those who opposed him.

Despite threats from kings and the pope, the heart of Luther's discouragement was in Wittenberg itself. He had a stormy relationship with that town in the last years of his life. He had threatened to leave more than once. On June 14, he preached a harsh sermon in the town church—his frequent pulpit since 1514—attacking the stinginess of the church members, both toward the needs of the church and the care of the poor. “What are we preaching?” Luther said. “It would be better if we would quit. It seems that everything is lost.”⁵ He had hoped that once people were freed from religious rituals demanded by a controlling church, they would find new energy to care for their neighbors in need. A few responded in this way, but mostly Wittenberg experienced a growth of greed and indifference.

In his lectures on Genesis that summer, he was also speaking very critically of the way Wittenbergers lived. He contrasts the frugality of the ancient people of Egypt with reckless spending on liquor and luxuries in Saxony:

For look what happens in our little town, where, after making calculations, the citizens have found that more than 4000 gulden are spent annually for barley. What, alas, is the meaning of such waste? Day and night we guzzle and fill our bellies with beer. But if we took as much pleasure in thrift, frugality, and temperance as we do in reckless wastefulness, we would be able to save and keep two or three thousand guldens every year. But how much wine the gluttons pour down in addition to the beer! How much is consumed by luxury in clothing and other useless things that are brought into our lands by the merchants!⁶

5. Cited in Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther—The Preservation of the Church: 1532–46*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 262. Hereafter: Brecht III. Brecht's three-volume biography of Luther is the current standard; he is one of the few biographers to have explored the importance of this 1545 crisis.

On July 25, Luther set out on a journey that was expected to last at least two weeks. He accompanied his Wittenberg colleague Caspar Cruciger on a visit to Bishop Amsdorf in Zeitz. He was also planning to preach at a wedding some days later in nearby Merseburg. Luther's son Hans traveled with them. As often happened in his own region of Saxony late in life, Luther was welcomed warmly and entertained handsomely at each stop along the way.

Three days later, he wrote a very serious letter to his wife Katie. He told her that he had decided never to return to Wittenberg. He thought they should move to her farm in Zölsdorf, south of Leipzig, the one she had bought from her brother John as the last piece of the old von Bora estate. Luther believed they could live there comfortably, selling their properties in and near Wittenberg and giving their big house (the former monastery) back to the elector. He was prepared to ask that ruler, Duke John Frederick of Saxony, to continue Luther's professorial salary for a year. He said that he did not think he would live any longer than that.⁷

This was not a trial-balloon retirement scheme. Luther was really angry at Wittenberg and determined not to return. He told Katie that she should make all the arrangements and join him in Zeitz. She could, if she liked, ask the town pastor, John Bugenhagen, to say farewell for him and inform Master Philip Melancthon as well. But he would not come back. "My heart has become cold, so that I do not like to be there any longer."⁸

The letter offers clues about what was wrong, but the whole story has to be pieced together. Luther said he had heard something shocking about Wittenberg on his travels, some piece of gossip that confirmed his sense of the low morals of the place. One of Luther's

6. "Lectures on Genesis 47" (1545) in LW 8:120.

7. Luther was right, as we shall see. He died about six months later on February 18, 1546.

8. "Letter to Mrs. Martin Luther" (July 28, 1545) in LW 50:278.

own maids, who had worked her way into their household with a phony story, was now pregnant and abandoned by her lover. He called the city “Sodom” after the biblical city that so displeased God.

But even more, his disappointment seems related to the hard-heartedness and greediness that Luther had been attacking in his sermons. He did not want Katie living there after his death. He warned her, “The four elements at Wittenberg certainly will not tolerate you.”⁹ He was a wise and experienced pastor, and he had always taught—against many of his Roman Catholic and radical Protestant opponents—that perfection eludes Christians in this earthly life. But it seemed increasingly true that his long work, especially his preaching, had been in vain in the very place where he had labored the longest and the hardest.

We do not know how his wife reacted, but the letter was a bombshell in the town of Wittenberg. The university had been built on the attraction of Luther and Melanchthon. If Luther left, students would stop coming, and Melanchthon himself might leave. This would be a blow to the university and to the town as well. Neither friends nor critics wanted things to end this way. A letter was drafted from the university to John Frederick, asking him to intervene. Professor Melanchthon himself traveled upriver to Torgau to deliver it to the prince.

At first, John Frederick was not available, but there was deep consternation at the Saxony court even before he returned. The chancellor, Gregor Brück, had been opposed for twenty years to Katherine Luther’s property acquisitions. Now he was sure that he had been right, and it would not be easy to dispose of the properties they wanted to sell. Melanchthon himself worried that Luther’s departure was caused by some differences between them on the

9. LW 50:278. The “four elements” refer to earth, air, fire and water. Luther is emphasizing that all imaginable forces may conspire against Katie.

teaching about the Lord's Supper that had arisen in recent years. Everyone saw the Luther crisis on his or her own terms.

That was true for John Frederick as well. He had been ruler of this part of Saxony since the death of his father, John the Steadfast, in 1532. He and his ally, Philip of Hesse, had become the leaders of the Lutheran movement within the empire. His wife, Princess Sybil, was a devoted friend of the Luther family. Luther's close friend George Spalatin had always supported Luther. The elector could imagine what the Roman Catholic enemies of Luther would make of the news of Luther's angry departure. He could visualize the harsh pamphlets and crude woodcuts that would circulate almost immediately. They would be a great source of mirth and encouragement for those assembled at the Council of Trent and in the emperor's court.

John Frederick also knew Luther could be very determined. For all the close ties that had bound them for decades, Luther could be stubborn. So John Frederick designed a three-prong plan. He sent his personal physician, Matthew Ratzeberger, to visit Luther. Luther had been ill so often recently, and the ruler sensed that Luther's own sense of impending death was a major factor in his decision. He also mobilized a group of Luther's friends—Melanchthon, Bugenhagen, and George Major—to go to him and reason with him. They were to enlist the help of Luther's other friends nearby, such as Amsdorf and Jonas. Finally, the elector wrote a personal and confidential message to Luther, asking that he visit him at the castle in Torgau. He knew Luther was not likely to ignore such a summons.

Luther had not been sitting depressed in Zeitz, however discouraged he may have been when he wrote to Katie. He had gone on with his work of visiting and preaching. On August 4, he preached a sermon at the marriage of Sigismund of Lindenau, the dean of the cathedral. This worthy man had been married for seven years, keeping it a secret for fear of the opponents of the Reformation.

Now it was to be made public. Luther gave a vigorous defense of marriage as God's good gift for men and women, and he attacked the false celibacy so insistently commended by the Roman Church but so frequently violated by their clergy.¹⁰

Then he went with his friend Justus Jonas to Halle for a day, so that he could preach there in the former home of his old opponent Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz—the one who started everything by hiring the monk John Tetzel to sell indulgences to help pay off his debts. Then Luther went back to Merseburg, where he ran into the delegation that had been sent to deal with the crisis. Ratzeberger and the others seem finally to have found him on August 6.

The negotiations went slowly, for Luther was at first determined not to return. Even when he agreed to go to Torgau to visit with John Frederick, they made their way slowly. The party paused in Leipzig so that Luther could preach there on Sunday, August 12. Finally, the next Friday, August 17, Luther met with John Frederick at the castle in Torgau. After that meeting, he agreed to go home.

Why did Luther change his mind? We have no account from him, but there are four likely reasons. First, Luther had been promised that things would be better in Wittenberg. There was an agreement by the leaders of the town, the university, and the elector to do something about the worse offenses to public morality—from the prostitutes that preyed on the students to the moneylenders who charged interest of up to 30 percent. At the end of 1545, a new ordinance tried to curb excesses, extravagance, even the amount of noise in the streets.

Second, Luther's friends were probably persuasive. The one who was railing against his longtime opponents at the wedding sermon

10. Luther's late-life crises are often seen as symptoms or manifestations of his psychological and physical problems, and there is some truth in that approach. However the sermon in Merseburg, just one week after the letter to Katie, is feisty and funny as ever and does not seem to be the work of an unduly discouraged or depressed man. The sermon can be found in LW 51:357–67.

in early August had not become indifferent to the outcome of the Reformation. Luther deeply trusted people such as Melanchthon and Bugenhagen, and he no doubt took to heart their warnings of the practical consequences that would result from his self-imposed exile.

Third, Luther took John Frederick seriously and was probably impressed by his arguments about the political blow that Luther's action would be to the Lutheran cause. Luther had always had good relationships with his princes and especially close ties with John Frederick and his father John before him. It would be hard for one who counseled obedience in all but the gravest circumstances to say no to a kindly and faithful prince.

Fourth and finally, on his travels Luther may well have remembered one crucial feature of his theology that was always slipping away. Among the greatest of Luther's formulations is his theology of the cross—his sense of hidden and surprising ways that God works in the world. You cannot jump to conclusions, Luther had been saying all his life, if you follow the God of the Bible. God's ways are hidden, and divine judgments not read from surface success or failure, strength or weakness.

When Luther went home on August 18, he wrote a poem in honor of Wittenberg and published it later that year with a wonderful woodcut of the town. It compared Wittenberg to Jerusalem—small among the cities of the ancient world and yet a place from which great things came forth. God had chosen a little, out-of-the-way place once again. A great renewal of Christianity had flowed from Wittenberg, from their work together. Luther hoped the Wittenbergers would not take for granted the astonishing things that had happened there, nor become complacently accustomed to a gospel that had radical implications when first preached to them. Perhaps the poem also implied that Luther would try not to jump to negative conclusions about the impact of the gospel. After all, such

things can never be seen perfectly even by the best observer or the wisest pastor.¹¹

So the summer crisis came to an end, although tensions remained between Luther and the town until he was buried in the castle church on February 22 of the next year. But several questions emerge from this incident that provide an opening to Luther, a way into understanding him after five hundred years.

There is a special challenge in approaching Luther because of his great communicative powers. He has many “sound bites” that cut through the centuries that separate us from him. These catch our attention and may make him seem more completely our contemporary than he is. For Luther is vast and complex enough that he can be read in many ways. Over the past centuries, people have raided the Luther story to make him all sorts of things, from the founder of the bourgeois family to the super-German patriot, from the ultimate advocate of prejudice and oppression to the father of public education and the Enlightenment.

Every Luther book ends up being partly a volume about its author, and everyone who reads Luther imposes a personal history on the Luther story.¹² Getting to know Luther in a balanced way requires taking his whole story into account, not just the thrilling early years of defying authority successfully, but also the middle years of constructing a new form of church life and the later years of living out the consequences of his good and bad decisions. Concentrating

11. A summary of the poem, which does not exist in English translation, can be found in Brecht III:265. Full text of the poem is in WA 35:593–95.

12. The most significant interpretation of Luther in recent decades comes from Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale, 1989). Oberman is especially persuasive on the dangers of “modernizing” Luther. He puts one of Luther’s strangest ideas to modern people at the heart of his study: Luther’s conviction of the centrality of the devil in the troubles besetting the church and the world.

on Luther's most exciting and enduring ideas is strategic, but his foibles, missteps, and ugly or ghastly mistakes also need recounting.

Along the way, five questions raised by this prologue will endure:

- How did the grandson of a peasant and son of a miner become so important?
- What could he have taught to generate both such loyalty and such hostility?
- How did he survive the powerful forces of church government that were against him?
- Which were the key ideas in his multitude of writings that held his Reformation together?
- Above all, as Luther himself was pondering in the summer of 1545, had it all been worthwhile and would any of it survive his death?