

(Biographies) Martin Luther

by John Piper

Martin Luther's discovery of the book emphasizes the importance of the external word of God, which is preserved in a book, and is the source of salvation and holiness.

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Scripture: Genesis 32:26, Psalm 119:18-35, Matthew 6:33

Topics: "Biblical Study", "Spiritual Discipline"

Description

In this sermon, Pastor John Piper emphasizes the importance of studying the word of God and rebukes the notion that one cannot be productive or find time for study due to other responsibilities. He draws inspiration from Martin Luther, who emphasized the value of studying the Bible and the languages it was written in. Luther's diligence in studying and translating the Bible, despite facing obstacles, serves as an example for believers today. Piper encourages listeners to approach the study of scripture with humility, prayer, and a desire to understand and apply its teachings.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from *Desiring God* is available at www.desiringgod.org Let me begin with some suggestions about how to listen to this talk. As last year, I have my manuscript in my hand, and we made 200 of them, and you may have them free when I'm done.

And therefore, I would suggest you not try to rigorously be writing things down. Everything I say, well, that's probably not true since I prayed for the gift of prophecy as I began, but almost everything I say will be here, and a lot more. I'm striking at least seven pages out of this to fit it into the time.

So, relax. The way I would listen if I were you is to open a piece of paper in front of me and be listening for the kinds of things you like to ask questions about, and that apply to you and hit you, and that would make a difference in your ministry. So, don't try to do any systematic note-taking because it's all there.

This is a really daunting task, isn't it? You know, it's easy to take a man and do a biographical study on him when he's got one biography written about him. Say Alexander White, maybe, or somebody. Luther, you know, the anniversary of his birth was 1983, the 400th anniversary.

His 450th anniversary of his death is in two weeks, and dozens of commentaries emerged in the 80s. And, of course, he wrote 60,000 pages, and so to undertake to do what I'm doing here is just ridiculous. So, I

had to narrow down, and the topic, I chose that topic that was printed months ago before I read anything, and the topic that I'm going to address is Martin Luther at Study.

It's very narrow, and I will leave out all the things you want to know about Luther, but we can talk about those later if you want to. But this has been very refreshing for me. I hope all of you in your churches set aside a Sunday, maybe Reformation Sunday, in which you put yourself under the pressure I put myself under to do this year after year, to do a biographical study.

You force yourself to do it, and then you do it for your church. I sometimes present these to my church after I've done it for you, and they're always well-received. So, do that.

You won't do it unless you force yourself to do it, probably, and it will be rich for you as it is for me. Luther discovers the book, my first subheading. One of the greatest discoveries of the Reformation, rediscoveries, especially of Martin Luther, is that the Word of God comes to us in a book.

The Word of God comes to us in a book. In other words, Luther grasped the powerful fact that God preserves the experience of salvation and holiness from generation to generation in a book of revelation, not a bishop in Rome, and not in the ecstasies of Thomas Müntzer and the Zwickau prophets. One of Luther's arch-opponents, Sylvester Priereus, wrote in response to the 95 Theses, he who does not accept the doctrine of the Church of Rome and Pontiff of Rome as an infallible rule of faith, from which the Holy Scriptures too draw their strength and authority, is a heretic.

In other words, the Church and the Pope are the authoritative deposit of salvation and the Word of God, and the book is derivative in truth and authority. And what's new in Luther, Heikel Obermann wrote, is the notion of absolute obedience to the Scriptures against any authorities, be they popes or councils. In other words, the saving and sanctifying authoritative Word of God comes to us in a book.

1539, he's commenting on Psalm 119, he wrote, in this Psalm, David always says that he will speak, think, talk, hear, read, day and night and constantly, but about nothing else than God's commandments for God wants to give you His Spirit only through the external Word. That phrase became determinative for this message. The external Word is the book.

God wills that His Spirit move through you, into you, on you, only, he says, through the external Word. And we got to let this hit us. It's external in the sense that it's objective, it's fixed, it's outside ourselves.

It is therefore absolutely unchanging. Neither ecclesiastical hierarchy nor fanatical ecstasy can replace it or shape it in any way. It is external like God is external.

You can take it or leave it, but you can't make it anything other than what it is. It is a book with letters and words and sentences and paragraphs that you have nothing to do with creating, and it will be here when you're gone. It is outside of you.

It is absolutely objective and real and external outside of you. He said in 1545 with resounding forcefulness, this year before he died, he died when he was 62 at 1546, let the man who would hear God speak, read Holy Scripture. And earlier he had said, commenting on Genesis, the Holy Spirit himself and God, the creator of all things, is the author of this book.

So the book that he discovered is God's book. And one of the implications that the word of God comes to us in a book is that the theme of this conference is the pastor and his study, not the pastor and his seance

or the pastor and his intuition or the pastor and his religious multi perspectival ism. The word of God that saves and sanctifies from generation to generation is preserved in a book.

And therefore every pastor's work is bookwork. It is book work, call it reading, call it meditation, call it reflection, call it cogitation, call it study, call it exegesis, call it what you will, a large and central, not to overstate it, a large and central part of our work is to wrestle God's meaning from a book and proclaim it in the power of the Holy Spirit. Now Luther knew that people would stumble at this arch conservatism.

That's arch conservatism, fixed outside you, unchanging, no ability to have any influence on the word of God whatsoever. It is there. That's arch conservatism.

He knew that the responses to this would be troubling. For example, he knew that it would be accused of belittling the Holy Spirit, that we minimize and nullify the work of the Holy Spirit by speaking of the word of God preserved for us in a book, letter, the book. And he said in essence, yes, that might happen.

One might argue that emphasizing the brightness of the sun nullifies the value of the surgeon who gives sight to the eyes, but it isn't true that glorify the sun shining at noon day calls into question the value of the surgeon who enables you to see. That isn't true. He said in 1520, be assured that no one will make a doctor of the Holy Scriptures save only the Holy Ghost from heaven.

Luther was a great lover of the Holy Spirit. His exaltation of the book as an external word did not belittle the spirit. On the contrary, he would say it elevated the spirit's great gift to Christendom 1533.

He said, the word of God is the greatest, most necessary, most important thing in Christendom. Without the external word, we would not know one spirit from the other. He said, and the objective personality of the Holy Spirit himself would be lost in a blur of subjective expressions.

Cherishing the book implied to Martin Luther that the Holy Spirit is a beautiful person to be known and worshipped, not a buzz to be felt. And you would never know him apart from the book. For the spirit's sake, we exalt the book.

The second objection he knew would come is that this is a little more modern, though both are very modern. To the degree that you exalt this, people will say you minimize the incarnate word. Jesus Christ himself, born of a virgin, crucified, risen, reigning, when you exalt a book, Luther says that the opposite is true.

To the degree that the word of God is disconnected from the objective external word, this book, to that degree, the incarnate word becomes a wax nose in the preference of every generation. You do not honor or exalt the incarnate word, the historical Jesus, by in any way minimizing the external word. Luther said that the one weapon with which he could rescue the incarnate word from being sold in the markets of Wittenberg was the external word.

He drove out the money changers, the indulgent sellers, with one whip, the word, the external word. So Christ, the historical Jesus, is magnified and glorified and preserved in his excellency precisely through saying that the word of God is preserved for us one way, in a book. It's an amazing observation.

The implications of it are simply stunning. They are world-shaking. So for the sake of the Holy Spirit and his beautiful personhood and the relationship we can enjoy with him in dynamic fellowship and for the sake of the glory of Jesus Christ, who is not anybody's wax nose, we and Luther exalt the book.

The book, he said, the apostles themselves considered it necessary to put the New Testament into Greek and to bind it fast to that language, doubtless in order to preserve it for us safe and sound as in a sacred ark. The implications of this truth that he rediscovered for the pastoral ministry are immense. We pastors are essentially brokers of the word of God transmitted in a book.

We are brokers of the living word of God preserved and transmitted for us in a book. We are fundamentally readers, teachers, proclaimers of a message in a book. And all of this is for the glory of the incarnate word and for the indwelling Holy Spirit.

But neither the word incarnate nor the indwelling spirit leads us away from the book, which Luther called the external word, Christ himself. Now mark this Christ himself, the living risen Lord stands forth for worship, stands forth for fellowship and stands forth for obedience in our lives today from the book. That's where he stands forth.

And Luther would say preaching is simply the contemporary release of that fixed external external word into the lives of people for the fellowship of the living Christ. The spirit of God broods over this book because the book is the only place where Christ is clear and the spirit loves clear pictures of Jesus. The spirit is in the business of glorifying a finally contoured Christ, not a fuzzy, hazy, mushy Christ.

And therefore he broods over the pages of the book. If you want to walk into the presence of the spirit in preparation for your message, you put your elbows on either side of the book and you'll be in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Now, the question I want to ask this morning afternoon is what difference did this discovery make in the way he carried on the ministry of the word? And I want to learn with you from Luther, how to study in view of this great reformation discovery.

He was a university professor all of his life. And therefore, the problem arises in this room that we would tend to say he doesn't know what we deal with. He's not a pastor.

So you're elevating of him as kind of a model for study is totally irrelevant because we're not university professors. And I want to answer that objection by just walking with you toward his professorship first, historically, so you can get a feel for his life and then giving three reasons why he should be listened to in this regard. Born November 10, 1483 in Iceland to a copper miner who wanted him so badly to be a lawyer.

And he was on his way to being a lawyer. Heiko Obermann, you'll hear that name frequently because the two biographies I have used are Here I Stand, Roland Bainton and Heiko Obermann, Luther, Man Between God and the Devil. That's all.

I didn't read any other biographies. I looked in other biographies and look, use their indexes and read them straight through. So you're ahead of me if you've read more than two biographies of Luther.

His father, Heiko Obermann said we know almost zero from substantiated evidence of his first 18 years. 1502, at the age of 19, he receives a bachelor's degree, University of Erfurt, 30th in his class out of 57, probably owing to the fact that his early education was lousy, Obermann surmised. January 1505, he receives his Master of Arts, same university.

He was on his way home from law school, as you know, July 2nd, 1505, when a thunderstorm broke out and he was knocked literally off of his horse by lightning. And he was so frightened that he cried out, help me, Saint Anne, I will become a monk. In other words, since he did not know the safety of the gospel, he

took the next best thing, which was the safety of the monastery.

And his, to his father's utter dismay, he kept his vow two weeks later and went to the monastery there and asked to be accepted, which he was. July 17, 1505, at the Augustinian Hermit Monastery in Erfurt. Now, later on, he said, that was a blatant sin, what I did.

I went against my father's will and I did it out of fear. And then he said, but oh, how much good the merciful Lord has allowed to come of it. And just a parenthetical encouragement to you, reading biography and church history is so hope-giving because you see the providence of God overcoming foolish decisions.

And some of you are right now in crises because of very stupid decisions that you've made. And you are wondering whether there's any future for marriage, for parenting, for ministry, and the answer is the sovereignty of God manifest in this ungodly, carnal decision. Martin Luther, the sovereignty of God is great enough to do wonders through your stupid decisions.

Because he did with Martin Luther. It would be now 20 years before he got married. Got married when he was 41.

And I mention that because he walked through 41 years of his life as a single person and dealt with high-level drives and yet wrote about his monastery experience. In the monastery, I did not think about women, money, or possessions. Instead, my heart trembled and fidgeted about whether God would bestow his grace on me.

For I had strayed from faith and could not but imagine that I had angered God, whom I in turn had to appease by doing good works. There's absolutely no theological gamesmanship in this man that I can see. Everything is blood-earnest because his whole conscience was at stake.

He said, if I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy. There's the talk of a man who knows what guilt is and how desperate he is to get right with God. He was ordained to the priesthood then in 1507, 23 years old now.

Two years, he taught philosophy, Aristotle, moral philosophy, which he always said later was waiting for the real thing. In 1509, the real thing came. His beloved counselor and teacher and friend, Johannes von Staupitz, admitted him to the Bible, meaning he let him lecture on the Bible.

In 1509, he began his rigorous, earnest study of scripture in order to lecture. October 19, 1512, at age 28, he earns his doctorate in theology, and now Staupitz calls him to Wittenberg from Erfurt, where he's been teaching, calls him to Wittenberg to take the chair of biblical theology, which Staupitz had held for 10 years, and that chair Martin Luther kept the rest of his life. He was a university professor of theology from 1512 to 1546 when he died.

That's the way he lived and worked. So the question for us pastors is, can a professor of theology say things and model things about study which would be useful for us? And let me give you three reasons why we should listen. Number one, he was more of a preacher than any of us has been or ever will be, without exception.

There were two churches in Wittenberg, the town church and the castle church. He was a regular preacher at the town church. He said, if I could today become king or emperor, I would not give up my office as a preacher.

He's a university professor all his life. I would not give up my office as a preacher. He was driven by a passion to exalt God in the word.

Here's one of his prayers. Dear Lord, dear Lord God, I want to preach so that you are glorified. I want to speak of you, praise you, praise your name, although I probably cannot make it turn out well.

Won't you make it turn out well? Now to feel the force of this commitment to preaching, you need to realize that in Wittenberg in those days, there were no programs in the church. All they did was worship and preach every day, 10 o'clock, no 5 a.m. Sunday morning, sermon on the epistle, 10 a.m. Sunday morning, sermon on the gospel, afternoon message on the old Testament or the catechism, Monday and Tuesday sermons on the catechism, Wednesdays, Matthew, Thursdays and Fridays, the apostolic letters and Saturday sermons on John. Every day, a sermon in Wittenberg for the years 1512, 1546.

Now, Luther was not the pastor of this church. Johannes Bugenhagen, his friend, was the pastor from 1521 to 1558. But Luther preached because, he said, the people want to hear me and because his doctorate in theology was viewed by him as a call to teach the word of God to the whole church.

One of the other commentaries, I mean, biographies that I looked at was by Walter Löwenisch, which said Luther was one of the greatest preachers in the history of Christendom. Between 1510 and 1546, Luther preached approximately 3,000 sermons. For example, 1522, he preached 117 sermons.

1523, the next year, 137 sermons. 1528, he preached 200 sermons, 200 times. 1529, 121 sermons.

Now, do a little math with me. Take those four years and add them together and then divide them, and what you come up with is an average of one sermon every two and a half days for those four years. Fred Musner, who wrote a very helpful little book, Luther the Preacher, never a weekend off, he knows about all that.

Never even a weekday off, never any respite at all from preaching, teaching, private study, production, writing, counseling. So the first link with us and him is that he preached more than you and I will ever preach. If you complain about having to get one or two or three sermons ready, shut your mouth, in the face of Martin Luther, because he preached every other day almost for most of his life.

Second thing that links us is that he was a family man eventually. 41 years old, he marries Katharina von Bora, that would be worth a lecture, but you do that for your own people, it'll be more interesting than this one probably. He knew the pressure and the heartache of rearing and losing children.

Katie bore him six children, boom, boom, boom. She was 26 years old, not 41 when they got married. And the first child, Johannes was born in 1526, Elizabeth was born in 1527, Magdalena 1529, Martin 1531, Paul 1533, and Margaret in 1534.

Now here, compute with me again. Between Elizabeth and Magdalena, let me get this right here, yes. Between the birth of Elizabeth, 1527, Magdalena 1529 is the year that he preached 200 times.

And Elizabeth died that year at eight months old. One of the reasons for this man's remarkable impact is that he was absolutely undaunted in his productivity. I mean, when you have a year where your kid gets sick and dies, you take a break, you cut back, you survive, right? He preached more that year than any other year.

And lest we think he neglected his children, which would be an easy thing to draw, on those Sunday afternoons, for example, after he had often preached twice, once at 5 a.m. and once at 10, he led his family in afternoon devotions, which for them was one hour and it was another sermon and it was just not for the kids, but for everybody who was in the house. And you know his house was always full of visitors. You learn that from the table talk.

So Luther knew, this is the second thing that unites us, Luther knew the pressures of being a public man pressured and a family man. Here's the third thing. He was a churchman.

He was not an ivory tower theological scholar. He was in, on, and led most of the controversies of his day in those conferences. There was the Heidelberg Disputation.

There was the Leipzig Disputation with Eck and Karlstadt. There was the Diet of Worms with the emperor. There was the Marburg Colloquy with Zwingli.

There was the Diet of Augsburg, which produced that great document. One after the other, everybody in the Northern Europe was looking to him as the lightning rod for getting these things worked out. Besides that, there was a stream of publications that all related to the church.

In 1520, he wrote 120, 133 published works. In 1522, 130. In 1523, 183, compute, one every other day.

He's preaching hundreds of times a year. He's lecturing every day at the university. He has six kids and he writes a publishable document every other day.

Besides that, everybody flocked to him, besieging his door hourly. Trooped citizens, doctors, princes, diplomatic enigmas were to be solved. Naughty theological points were to be settled.

The ethics of social life were to be laid down. Now, let me give you an illustration here because if you're like me, you tend to resent interruptions when you want to study. And you tend to excuse yourself for not being more productive because there are many pressures in your life.

And there are people to be visited and counseling sessions to be had and family matters to be tended to and broken cars to be fixed. And while they didn't have broken cars to fix, they had broken bodies that nobody could figure out. Nobody could fix his constipation.

I mean, this was a horrible thing that he had to deal with. I'll come back to that later. I got things to say about his physical condition, but they had their problems.

No electric light during all this time. No heat during all this time produced nice, like we have heat here, perfect temperature. If it gets a little chilly on the front row, I just kind of, why doesn't somebody fix this thing? And I didn't have any of that.

So I wanted to know, does Martin Luther deal with the nitty gritty practical stuff? Like how do you do small groups in a church? Well, here's what I found out. When the Reformation got underway and the fabric was rent for how you do church, who's going to reinvent church? Who's going to answer the hundreds of questions? What do we do now that the Rome is not our guide and mother anymore? Well, where did they look? They looked to poor Martin, the university professor who's preaching 200 times a year to answer every practical question. So here's what he suggests.

He goes to the state officials in Saxony and he goes to the university and says, let's have visitors, capital V, send the visitors through all the parishes to take stock of how the parishes are going and make suggestions for how to do church. He didn't use that term, but that's what he was doing. And they say, well, what are we going to tell him? He said, I'll write you something.

So he writes this thing called instructions for the visitors of parish pastors in electoral Saxony. If you want to read nitty gritty stuff in Martin Luther, get that little work in the collected works. For example, among all the things he dealt with, he has a section in there called the education of younger children.

And he gets so specific that he says now the way we're going to do this is that we'll break them down into pre-readers, readers, and advanced readers. And then he suggests how to teach them. They shall first learn to read the primer in which are found the alphabet and the Lord's prayer and the creed and other prayers.

When they have learned this, they shall be given Donatus and Cato to read Donatus and to expound Cato. The schoolmaster is to expound one or two verses at a time. And the children are to repeat these at a later time so that they thereby build up a vocabulary.

Martin Luther wasting his time telling people how to teach kids, right? Don't ever say that you can't be productive or that you don't have time to study because you got to solve nitty gritty nursery problems or Sunday school problems or small group problems or worship problems. That's the way I feel. And I'm rebuked by Martin Luther saying, get off it.

You're in the real world. And I am a university professor and I preach two or three times a week and I go to conferences all over the world. And besides that, there's a warrant out for my arrest and I can be killed anywhere outside Saxony.

Get off it. Belly aching American pastors. So my conclusion is, let us listen to this man.

All that's introduction, believe it or not. What difference the book made in his study. Now, here's the key.

I think the importance of study was so interwoven for Luther with the discovery of the gospel, the precious conscience relieving gospel. It was so interwoven how he made his discovery that he could never be anything but passionate about the importance of study. Couldn't, he couldn't just given his history in his own personal life.

Study was never anything less than utterly crucial life giving history, shaping stuff that we are called to do. And I wonder today, this is an exhortation, whether we take so much for granted about the truth and about the word that we can hardly imagine what it costs Luther to break through to the truth and to sustain access to the truth. We really need to ask brothers.

We need to ask whether all the ground gained by Luther, the other reformers may be lost. If we lose a passion for study while assuming that truth just remains obvious. Now to see this intertwining of study and gospel discovery, let's go back to his discovery.

Let me read it to you. You've read this, but I want to read it again. This is so, I mean, this moment in his life, which he dates in 1518, during his Psalm lectures, when he found the gospel and walked through gates into paradise, the historical implications of this moment for our lives, for this church and all your churches is just incalculable.

Now, listen, as I read this, it's about a page and a half. Listen, as I read this for about six places, I'll point them out when I'm done, but you listen, six places where study was the issue in the discovery. I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the epistle to the Romans.

But up till then, it was a single word in chapter one, verse 17, in it, the righteousness of God is revealed that had stood in my way. For I hated that word, righteousness of God, which according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Thus, I raged against God with my troubled conscience.

Nevertheless, I, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what Saint Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely in it, righteousness of God is revealed as it is written, he who through faith is righteous shall live. There, there, I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which righteous, the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith.

And this is the meaning, the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely the passive righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, he who through faith is righteous shall live. Here, I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Here, a totally other face of the entire scripture showed itself to me.

Thereupon, I ran through the scriptures from memory, looking for analogies, and I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word righteousness of God. Thus, that place in Paul was for me truly the gate of paradise. Now let me rehearse them for you.

I had been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul. I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, Romans 1 17, at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. Where are people today doing that? Where is somebody struggling? Where are the Christian counselors today who are beating on the book of Romans? Give it to me.

Give me a solution for multiple personality disorder. Where is anybody doing that? At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, thereupon I ran through the whole scripture from memory. That place in Paul was for me a gate to paradise.

The seeds of all of Luther's study habits are there. They're all there. So let me begin.

I've got six, I think, and here we go. The marks of Luther at study. Number one, Luther came to elevate the biblical text itself above all commentators and church fathers.

Maybe I don't need to dwell on this because it's been hit at least twice. He wrote, for a number of years, I have now annually read through the Bible twice. Heiko Oman said he did that at least 10 years after the great discovery read through the Bible twice a year.

If the Bible were a large, mighty tree, he said, and all its words were little branches. I have tapped at all the branches eager to know what was there and what it had to offer. He who is well acquainted with the scripture text, he said, is a distinguished theologian.

The dear fathers, he wrote, the dear fathers wished by their writing to lead us to the scriptures, but we so use them as to be led away from the scriptures, though the scriptures alone are the vineyard in which we

ought to work and toil. The Bible is buried, he said, in a wealth of commentaries. And if he had a wealth, what do we have? The Bible is buried in a wealth of commentaries and the text is being neglected.

Although in every branch of learning, they are the best who are well acquainted with their text. Now that was not owing to a kind of purist literary liberal arts fascination. It was owing to the very simple fact he found his life that way.

He found his life by beating on the apostle, beating on verse 17, just hammering at it. I will not let you go until you bless me and speak to me the truth, increasing accuracy by living with the God of the scriptures. I think I'm going to pass over things there and move to the second one.

The second thing is that because of his preoccupation with the primary place of the text over against secondary literature, he was intensely preoccupied with grappling with the very words of Paul and the other biblical writers. Let's mark that. Intensely preoccupied with grappling with the very words of Paul.

He told his students that the exegete should treat a difficult passage differently, no differently than Moses did the rock in the desert when he smote it with his rod in order to get water from it in the summer and the fall. Here's an illustration in the summer and the fall of 1526, everybody almost had left Wittenberg that could leave Wittenberg because the plague, he did not feel free to do that. So he and Johannes Brueghenhagen stayed there and ministered to the people.

And there was a little cluster of theological students left at the university who didn't leave for some reason. And he decided he would take up Ecclesiastes during the plague and teach it. And he writes Solomon, the preacher is giving me a hard time as though he begrudged anyone lecturing on him, but he must yield.

You see, that's years later, but it's the same metaphor. He beat importunately on the apostle Paul. And here he says, Solomon, you will yield.

Word of God will be understood here. I will not let you go. So that's the second trait of his study, an intense preoccupation with the very wording of the text.

Here's the third one. The power and preciousness of what Luther saw when he beat importunately on the apostle's language convinced him forever that reading Greek and Hebrew was one of the greatest privileges and responsibilities of a Reformation preacher. Now we've heard a little bit from both Kent and Ian, but both of them, I think a little timidly, I'm not going to be timid because I am representing Luther and he didn't know the meaning of the word timid.

All right, now just put on your thick skins, all you who have forgotten your Greek and Hebrew, because you're going to feel awful when I'm done, though I will try to rescue you from the pit at the end. He said, it is certain that unless the languages remain, the gospel must finally perish. There's no academic gamesmanship here.

He's not playing around with, oh, let's be scholarly. He asks, do you inquire what use there is in learning the languages? Do you say we can read the Bible well in German? And he answers his own question. Without the languages, we could not have received the gospel.

This is why it's so precious to him. Without the languages, we could not have received the gospel. Languages are the scabbard that contains the word of the spirit.

If the we neglect the literature, we shall eventually lose the gospel. No sooner did men cease to cultivate the languages than Christendom declined even until it fell under the undisputed dominion of the Pope. But no sooner was the torch relighted than this papal owl fled with a shriek into congenial gloom.

In former times, the fathers were frequently mistaken because they were ignorant of the languages. And in our days, there are some who, like the Waldenses, do not think the languages are of any use. But although their doctrine is good, they have often erred in the real meaning of the sacred text.

And they are without arms against error. And I fear much that their faith will not remain pure. The main issue for Martin Luther was the preservation and the purity of the Christian faith, where the languages of Greek and Hebrew are not prized and pursued.

Care is my word now. Care in biblical observation and biblical thinking and concern for truth decreases. It has to.

Because tools to think otherwise are not present. If you do not know Greek, you cannot handle the biblical text as seriously as you could if you knew Greek. It's not a question of preference.

It's a question of possibility. It is not possible to handle the biblical text as rigorously, as carefully, to show as much concern for the original intention as if you were reading it in the language in which the apostles wrote. He said, this is him now, if the languages had not made me positive as to the true meaning of the word, I might have still remained a chained monk engaged in quietly preaching Romish errors in obscurity of a cloister.

The pope, the sophists, and their anti-Christian empire would have remained unshaken. You see what he thinks hung on his languages? The whole Reformation, he believes, hung on the languages. He says it is impossible for him not to run into obstacles everywhere who does not know the languages.

And then he adds this, that freshness and force in preaching come from knowing the languages. He says, but when the preacher is versed in the languages, his discourse has freshness and force. The whole of scripture is treated and faith finds itself constantly renewed by a continual variety of words and works.

I left out the harsher things that he said about those who have neglected their languages. But now let me say a word I hope will encourage you and exhort you in two ways. Many of you either never have had the time or the will to learn Greek and Hebrew and many more of you have let them languish.

By the way, I'm 50 this month and I have maybe, Lord willing, 15 more years in this church and every time I go away in January to renew myself at the Shalom House for a few days, read Martin Luther and think about the year, I find myself, by reading these kinds of things, pricked in my conscience and awakened to revive and renew my efforts with Hebrew. Greek is not a problem for me because I had a chance to teach it. So when you teach something, you really learn it.

I never taught Hebrew and so I've struggled with it ever since seminary days. And so I am resolved again, age 50, age 50, this is an exhortation especially to younger guys who think, oh I'm 30, 35, 40, what's the use of me trying with languages because it's too late. Baloney! It's not too late.

John Eliot, at age 42, learned the Algonquin language and planted dozens of churches and the Algonquin language has words in it 23 letters long. You won't find any words in the Greek New Testament 23 letters long. It's not too late.

But here's what I would say to you, try to ameliorate things here a bit. I would say that knowing the languages can make any devoted preacher a better preacher, more fresh, more faithful, more confident, more penetrating. But it is possible to be a very good preacher and a very powerful preacher without them, at least for a season.

The test of our faithfulness, I think, as a corporate body in the church in America or around the world, the test of our faithfulness to the word is this, if we have lost our languages ourselves. Do we have a heart and a mind large enough to show concern for the whole church of Christ by promoting the preservation, widespread teaching and use of the languages? Or are we so weak and frightened and small of self-possession that we have to minimize their importance to justify our ignorance? So I plead with you who do not have the languages to exalt them, humbly exalt them. Now, you can take the time to learn, especially if you're younger.

I want to make my Hebrew better in 1996 so that I will be more faithful in my exposition of the Old Testament, more penetrating, more fresh, more reliable. And if you're younger, you can do that. But I have in mind something bigger than that.

Suppose you have just settled it. You're never going to know them. You're going to do the best you can with your English Bible.

Glorify them. Raise up young men in your church to become language lovers and tell them you wish you had and that you wish you could. If you had your life to live over, you probably would glorify.

And when you go to the seminary, tell the faculty, teach them, stop taking it away. Yes, I don't know them. Yes, I'm a pastor, but I think we need them because the gospel is at stake and time will show that if we minimize our commitment to the original languages, we minimize attention to specificity in the Bible.

It's everywhere today, folks. Minimizing specificity of doctrine is everywhere. And part of it is the loss of the languages.

OK, I think I'm done on that point. No, I'm going to say one more thing. Luther is going to say one more thing.

Quote, it is a sin and a shame not to know our own book or to understand the speech and words of our God. It is still greater sin and loss that we do not study languages, especially in these days when God is a marvel at what he's saying here, because he's not talking about computers. I have Greek and Hebrew instant parsing in front of me every day.

Just get Bible works or is a dozen good programs out there. Boom, it's parsed. Boom, you get the meaning in front of you.

Boom, you got 18 examples of it elsewhere. It's just there. Now listen to this in view of that.

It says it is a sin and a shame, especially in these days when God is offering and giving us men and books and every facility and inducement to this study and desires his Bible to be an open book. Oh, how happy the dear fathers would have been if they had our opportunity to study the languages and come thus prepared to the holy scriptures. Oh, how their effort puts our indolence to shame that was written in the 1500s.

Number four, trait number four of Luther indolence. He just referred to it. The fourth trait of his study was extraordinary diligence in spite of tremendous obstacles.

He was a professor of Bible all of his life. He wrote theological treatises, scars and scores and scores of them. He was always translating well for a period of about 13 years, translating the Bible.

He carried on voluminous correspondence because everybody wanted his counsel and advice. And remember no computers, no typewriters, all long hand and no ballpoint pens, no ordinary paper, all dip and scratch, dip and scratch. And he was preaching 200 times a year.

Now we are not Luther. Okay. These are always discouraging talks.

If you try to measure yourself by Spurgeon or Luther or somebody, we are not Luther. Let's just settle it. I'm not Martin Luther.

I can't read more than about 250 words a minute. I read less than most of you in this room. I know that to be a case.

And I get discouraged when I go into that bookstore and look at all that stuff that I will leave unread when I die. But the question he poses for us is this, wherever you are, whoever you are, are you diligent or are you slothful? Are you casual about your life or are you intense about living here? I can't help but quote my friend Edwards resolve to live with all my might while I live. He wrote some pastors and preachers are lazy and no good.

They do not pray. They do not read. They're not, they don't search the scriptures.

The call is watch, study, attend to reading in truth. You cannot read too much in the scriptures and what you read, you cannot read too carefully. And what you read carefully, you cannot understand too well.

And what you understand well, you cannot teach too well. And what you teach well, you cannot live too well. The devil, the world and our flesh are raging and raving against us.

Therefore, dear sirs and brothers, pastors, preachers, pray, read, study, be diligent. This evil shameful time is not the season for being lazy or sleeping and snoring. He said, household sweat is great sweat.

Political sweat is greater sweat. Church sweat is the greatest sweat. That's right.

And then of course, to bring in the balance as George Verwer says, let's be balanced here. Luther, here's what he says about balance. 1532, a person should work in such a way that he remains well and does not injure his body.

We should not break our heads at work and injure our bodies. I myself used to do such things and I have racked my brains because I still have not overcome the bad habit of overworking, nor shall I ever overcome it as long as I live. Now, I know that a psychologist counselor would rebuke me at the end of this because of how many burned out and broken pastors they deal with.

However, I want to read the apostle Paul to you because Luther loved his dear apostle who wrote 1 Corinthians 15:10. His grace toward me was not in vain, but I worked harder than any of them. That's the two apostles.

How about his relationship to the false apostles? He wrote 2 Corinthians 11 23. Are they servants of Christ? I speak as if in saying I am more so in far more labors, far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. So I don't know whether the apostle Paul at the end of his life would say, I shall never overcome the habit of overwork.

But there's enough. As you look at the apostle Paul to say, let's not be lazy. Let's work hard.

Number five, temptation and affliction are the hermeneutical touchstones of his study. Temptation and affliction are the hermeneutical touchstones of his study. Here's the key text.

He said, now some of you remember this from seminary days, that there were three ways to become a theologian. He gets this from Psalm 119. Oratio, meditatio, tentatio, prayer, meditation, and in German trials, suffering.

The hermeneutical key to the Bible is affliction. Biblical basis for that Psalm 119 67 and 71. Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep thy word.

Here's the key verse for 71. It is good for me that I was afflicted that I may learn thy statutes. Is that not amazing? Where do you see that in any hermeneutical textbook? You got to go back 300, 300 years, 400 years to read a hermeneutic that says the touchstone of my hermeneutic is pain.

He wrote, I want you to know how to study theology in the right way. I have practiced this method myself. Here you will find these three rules.

They teach you not only to know that the afflictions teach you not only to know and to understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's word is. It is wisdom supreme. Listen to this.

For I myself owe my papists many thanks for so beating, pressing, frightening me through the devil's raging that they have turned me into a fairly good theologian driving me to the goal I never would have reached. That's he's not playing games there. He was a marked man.

The ban of emperor Charles, Charles said, I have decided to mobilize everything against loser. This is the emperor of the, of the Roman empire. Charles V, I have decided to mobilize everything against Luther, my kingdoms, my dominions, my friends, my body, my blood, my soul.

You can kill him. Frederick of Saxony is the only reason he lived. There was some family dynamics going on here that he had a little space.

He had a little space and he could only go under armed guard, all these little places where he would, would go relentless slander. He said, if the devil can do nothing against the teachings, he attacks the person lying, slander, cursing, ranting at him. Just as the papists Beelzebub did to me when he could not subdue my gospel.

He wrote that I was possessed by the devil and was a changeling and my beloved mother, a whore and bath attendant. The, the, the, the, the, the rumor that was spread systematically was that his mother had had sex with the devil and that Martin Luther was half demon, which was not mythology in those days. That was a real possibility.

Physically, kidney stones, headaches, buzzing in his ears, infections, and this incapacitating piles. I nearly gave up the ghost, he said, and now bathed in blood can find no peace. What took four days to heal immediately tears open again.

Emotionally, spiritually, listen to, listen to this kind of torment for more than a week. I have been thrown back and forth in death and hell. My whole body feels beaten.

My limbs are still trembling. I almost lost Christ completely driven about in the waves and storms of despair and blasphemy against God. But because of the intercession of the faithful, God began to take mercy on me and tore my soul from the depths of hell.

He looked very invulnerable on the outside. You read his biography. I think, well, this man was a giant, but here he is in Wartburg where he supposedly was flat out translating the new Testament in 10 months.

And this is what he wrote to Melanchthon. I sit here at ease, hardened and unfeeling, alas, praying little, grieving little for the church of God, burning rather in the fierce fires of my untamed flesh. It comes to this.

I should be a fire in the fire, in the spirit. In reality, I am a fire in the flesh with lust, laziness, idleness, sleepiness. It is perhaps because you have all ceased praying for me that God has turned away from me.

For the last eight days, I have written nothing, nor prayed, nor studied, partly from self-indulgence, partly from another vexatious handicap. That's his piles he's talking about. I really cannot stand it any longer.

Pray for me, I beg you, for in my seclusion here, I am submerged in sins. My own testimony here in this regard would be that I am tempted constantly to resent the hardships of the ministry precisely because they get in the way of what I want to do. And Luther has rebuked me and he has taught me afresh that the very painful visit that you may have to make today, the very painful phone call that you have to make, the very squabble that you may have to address, the very practicalities that frustrate you so much may be, will be, the lens through which this text opens.

Tentatio is the pathway to be a faithful biblical theologian. One final point. He says, the faith to get through this exceeds my powers.

And this is probably the most important point because Luther believed it was the most important point in his theology. The sixth point is prayer and reverent dependence on the all-sufficiency of God. We've heard this too, but I want you to hear it from Luther because it's remarkable.

You get right to the center of Luther's theology this way. 1518 he writes, that the holy scriptures cannot be penetrated by study and talent is most certain. Therefore, your first duty is to begin to pray and to pray to this effect, that if it pleased God to accomplish something for his glory, not for yours or any other person's, he very graciously grant you a true understanding of his words.

For no master of the divine words exists except the author of these words, as he says, they shall be all taught of God. You must therefore completely despair of your own industry and ability and rely solely on the inspiration of the spirit. Now, he did not mean you leave the external word, the book, and go to mystical reveries.

He meant bathe all of that study that he's been talking about in prayer and cast yourself on God to sustain you and prosper you in your study. He says, since the holy writ wants to be dealt with in fear and humility

and penetrated more by studying with pious prayer than with keenness of intellect, therefore, it is impossible for those who rely on their intellect and rush into scripture with dirty feet like pigs, as through scripture they were merely a sort of human knowledge not to harm themselves and others whom they instruct. And he goes again to someone 19 and you read someone 19.

And what do you find David doing? Open my eyes that I may see. Make me understand thy way. Teach me, O Lord.

Give me understanding. Make me walk in my path. Incline my heart to thy testimonies.

Revive me. In other words, he's crying out to the Lord to be an interpreter through him and to enable him. So be saturated in prayer.

Go to the study with self-doubt and God-reliance. He says, you should completely despair of your own sense of reason, for by these you will not attain the goal. Rather, kneel down on your little private room and with sincere humility and earnestness pray God through his dear son graciously to grant you the Holy Spirit to enlighten and guide you in this understanding.

Now, here's the last thing to get. This approach toward study through a despair of your own ability and a reliance upon God was the essence of his theology and what he saw the essence of the Reformation controversy to be. And it came out in his controversy with Erasmus over the bondage of the will.

He wrote on Romans 8 7, the natural mind cannot do anything godly. It does not perceive the wrath of God, therefore cannot rightly fear him. It does not see the goodness of God, therefore cannot trust or believe in him either.

Therefore, we should constantly pray that God will bring forth his gifts in us. In other words, we are helpless and God is free to help us. And that is our only hope.

We are totally dependent, which is why he said on the bondage of the will, that this book is the one he wants to survive. This is the book he thought worthy of publication. And Erasmus has written his freedom of the will.

Luther responded with the bondage of the will, and he credited Erasmus with penetrating to the heart of the Reformation. He said, others think it's indulgences. Others think it's authority.

The issue of the Reformation is the powerlessness of man before God. Erasmus smelled it and as a modern man, he didn't like it. He wrote against it and Luther gave his strongest response to it by defending the powerlessness of man.

And it was a great offense to Erasmus and the others. Here's what Luther wrote. I condemn and reject as nothing but error, all doctrines, which exalt our free will as being directly opposed to this mediation and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In other words, the gospel of free grace depends upon a free God and a bound human will. If we begin to think that our will is not bound, but can break free of its own and launch ourselves towards God, then God's freedom is not the key to my justification. And there's the end of the Reformation and the end of the gospel in Luther's idea.

For since apart from Christ, sin and death are our masters and the devil is our God and Prince. There can be no strength or power to wit, no wit or wisdom by which we can fit or fashion ourselves for righteousness and life. On the contrary, blinded and captivated, we are bound to be the subjects of Satan and sin doing and thinking what pleases him and is opposed to God and his commandments.

The root issue of the Reformation and the root issue of studying the Bible is the powerlessness of the human mind and the human heart. He wrote on Galatians 1 11, it is true that the doctrine of the gospel takes all glory, wisdom, righteousness from men and ascribes them to the creator alone who makes everything out of nothing. And so his approach fundamentally to the word is to come as a beggar reliant upon the Lord, believing that everything he has in his head and everything he has in his hands, he has from the Lord.

And so the, the heart of the Reformation in its exaltation of the free grace of God over against the powerlessness of man is the essence of the way you study the Bible as well, namely in prayer, crying out to the Lord for his enabling grace and acknowledging that without him, we can do nothing. And this is the way he lived. This is the way he studied.

And finally, this is the way he died at 3.00 AM, February 18, 1546, with these last words, combining his German and his Latin. We are beggars. This is true.

Father, I pray that the zeal of Martin Luther and his allegiance to the external word and his lifelong passion to know it and to proclaim it and to defend it and to preserve it would inspire us to follow in these footsteps in Jesus name. I pray. Thank you for listening to this message by John Piper, pastor for preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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