

Lift Up a Standard for the People

by William Edwin Boardman

Luther's journey to faith and final freedom was marked by a series of events and encounters that led him to understand the principle of justification by faith and the power of faith in salvation.

Scripture: Psalm 119:105, Isaiah 62:10, John 8:36, Romans 1:17, Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Justification By Faith", "Reformation History"

Description

William Edwin Boardman preaches on the importance of historical examples in the Bible, emphasizing how they serve as living forms of sin, holiness, truth, and falsehood for our instruction. He highlights the transformative journey of Martin Luther, from a young man struggling with his faith and seeking salvation through works, to the moment of revelation when he fully grasped the principle of justification by faith in Jesus Christ, leading to his liberation and becoming a prominent reformer. Luther's experience demonstrates the power of God's Word to bring light, freedom, and full salvation to those who trust in Him.

Transcript

HISTORICAL EXAMPLE.

"LIFT UP A STANDARD FOR THE PEOPLE." -- ISAIAH LXII. 10.

The Bible abounds in examples. In God's Holy Word sin and holiness come up and pass on before us in living forms, rather than in abstract teachings. Truth and falsehood are first lived out, and then recorded for the world's instruction. The mercies and judgments of God are set before us in striking examples. The rescue of Noah saved amidst the desolations of a world drowned in the flood; Lot, delivered from the devouring fires which laid in ashes Sodom and Gomorrah; the children of Israel passing the Red Sea dry-shod and safe, while Pharaoh and his host sank as lead in the mighty waters; these things have filled the world with their report and taught all nations their lessons. Men and nations are raised up, live out their life, and die, and their history is written to live forever. Lessons taught in this way strike out and traverse the globe, and strike home never to be forgotten. There is no treatise upon faith like the simple story of Abraham's life: none upon patience like the story of Job: none upon courage like the story of Daniel: none upon meekness like the life of Moses: none upon zeal like the life of Paul: none upon love like the story of Job. This is God's method, and the best.

Take a few examples of The Higher Life, or Full Trust and Full Salvation. First,

MARTIN LUTHER.

When a little boy, Martin carried the faggots for his father, John Luther, to kindle the fire in his little iron smelting furnace, in Germany, God designed him to become the bearer of fuel for his own great fire of the Reformation, to smelt the hearts of millions and re-cast the life of the world. But as yet this boy's own heart and his own life were in the crude and corrupt state of nature, hard and unmaleable as the ore of the mine and as full of impurities, to be expelled only by the fires of Divine love. His mother loved and pitied and indulged him, but his father was severe and never spared the rod. That he was not an angel in his youth we may know, for he tells of himself that he was whipped fifteen times in one day in his first school. But all this did not beat grace into his heart, though it may have beaten letters into his head. He made brilliant progress in study, and at twenty years of age received his degree at the university as a Bachelor of Arts. Up to this time his heart was in the world. His father designed him for the law, and his own ambition no doubt aspired to the honors within easy reach in that line of life. God designed otherwise. Just at that critical time when the very next step would be the first in a life-long profession, one of his fellow students dear to him as a brother beloved, one Alexis, was assassinated. The report of this tragic affair coming to Luther's ear, he hurried to the spot and found it even so. Often before, conscience, and the spirit in his heart, had urged him to a religious life, in preparation for death and the judgment. And now, as he stood gazing upon the bloody corpse of his dear friend Alexis, and thought how in a moment, prepared or unprepared, he had been summoned from earth, he asked himself the question, "What would become of me if I were thus suddenly called away?"

This was in A. D. 1505, in summer. Taking advantage of the summer's vacation, Luther, now in his twenty-first year, paid a visit to Mansfeldt the home of his infancy. Even then the purpose of a life of devotion was forming in his heart, but not yet ripened into full and final decision. The only life of religion known to him, and at all meeting his convictions, was that of the convent, the life of a monk and a priest. Whether it was because the purpose was only yet in embryo, or because he dreaded his father's displeasure, or shrunk from dashing his father's hopes and giving him pain, it seems he kept the matter back. The fire burned on in his own breast, but the young Bachelor of Arts kept it hidden, even from those most deeply interested in him of all upon earth.

On his way back to the university, however, he was overtaken by a terrific storm. "The thunder roared," says D'Aubigne; "a thunderbolt sunk into the ground by his side; Luther threw himself on his knees; his hour is perhaps come. Death, judgment, eternity, are before him in all their terrors, and speak with a voice which he can no longer resist. 'Encompassed with the anguish and terror of death,' as he says of himself, 'he makes a vow, if God will deliver him from this danger, to forsake the world, and devote himself to his service.' Risen from the earth, having still before his eyes that death must one day overtake him, he examines himself seriously, and inquires what he must do. The thoughts that formerly troubled him returned with re-doubled power. He has endeavored, it is true, to fulfill all his duties. But what is the state of his soul? Can he, with a polluted soul, appear before the tribunal of so terrible a God? He must become holy"-- for this he will go into the cloister, he will enter a convent, he will become a monk and a priest in the Augustinian order. He will there become holy and be saved.

This scene has been compared to that on the Damascus road centuries before, and they are not without certain similarities, both in the men, and in the circumstances and results. But there were broad differences: for while Saul of Tarsus was relieved of his blindness after only three days of darkness and desolation, Luther had yet before him months and months of monastic groping, before his eyes were opened to receive the Lord Jesus as the All in All. And while at the word of Ananias the scales fell from the

eyes of the young devotee of Judaism at once, in a moment -- the eyes of the young devotee of Romanism were opened, not entirely at the first touch of the Master's fingers, but rather like him who first saw only men as trees walking, and afterwards, when touched again, saw clearly.

It was a terrible blow to his parents when Luther entered the convent at Erfurth, and an astonishment to all his friends, and, as it proved in the end, a painful experiment, and a vain one, to gain salvation. Christ alone could pardon sin, but Luther had that yet to learn. He thought to merit salvation. Christ alone is the sinner's righteousness and sanctification, but he fully believed the way to become holy and just, was to shut himself up within holy walls, amongst a holy brotherhood, and perform holy offices. God designed him to be the foremost reformer of the Church, and therefore led him through all the processes of the Church, to show him their emptiness and vanity: led him at last to Rome itself and made him see the blasphemous hollowness of all its ceremonies, and the vile corruption of the men he held in such veneration. But it is no part of our design now to follow him through all this wearisome course, or to recount the painful revelations of vanity and corruption made to him step by step as he was led along. It is rather with Luther's experience as a Christian than as a Reformer, that our present purpose is concerned. The object before us is to see how the Lord brought him out of bondage into liberty, and out of darkness into light, and brought him at last out of church processes, and out of the ways of his own devising, to take the a Lord Jesus as the all in all, rather than to show how he was trained to break the bondage and dispel the darkness of an enslaved and benighted church.

Buried in the convent at Erfurth he toiled and suffered two terrible years in vain for salvation. He became emaciated, pale, hollow-eyed, downcast, hopeless. The lovely and noble Staupitz, Vicar General and head of the Augustine order in Thuringia, was the first to shed any ray of light upon the dark and troubled mind of Luther. Staupitz pointed Luther to the word of God and to the grace of Christ, and inspired him with some gleams of hope that hope might some time be his. But although the floods of wrath from the windows of heaven were stayed, and the fountains of hell from beneath were closed, the waters gone over him had not yet subsided, the dove of peace found yet no resting place in his soul, and the bow of the covenant of promise had not yet sprung forth to his view. Indeed his struggles and watchings and fastings brought him to the brink of the grave. He was seized with an illness that threatened his life. One day a venerable monk came into his cell. Luther opened his heart to him. Despair had seized upon him. The pains of hell got hold of him. The good old man pointed him to his credo. Luther had learned the apostle's creed in his childhood, and had said it over thousands of times, but when the monk repeated to him in the tones of a sincere faith the words, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins," they carried a light and a consolation, never before felt, to the sufferer's soul. "Ah!" said the monk, "you must believe not merely that David's sins or Peter's are forgiven; the devils believe that. The commandment of God is, that we believe our own sins are forgiven. St. Bernard says, in his discourse on the annunciation, 'The testimony of the Holy Ghost to your heart is Thy sins are forgiven thee.'"

Luther believed, and joy filled his soul. He rose quickly from the depths of despair and from the bed of sickness. Life from the dead was given him in a two-fold sense. The forgiveness of sins was ever after a living article in his faith, and not a dead letter in the apostles' creed. He knew and was a witness to others that the greatest sinner may be forgiven. But as yet, the great underlying principle of justification by faith, was to him one of the deep and hidden things of God. The noble Staupitz and the good old Monk already before him, knew as much as Luther had now learned, and more. And all this Luther himself might have known, and yet lived a monk all his days. But God had greater things in store for him, and greater lessons to teach him. All this and more he might have taught life-long, with the burning zeal of a Paul, and the

commanding eloquence of an Apollos, without causing the foundation of Rome to tremble, or freeing the church from a single fetter or chain, and without even enjoying himself, the liberty of the children of God, or the blessings of full trust and full salvation. Mark what follows.

The assassination of the dear Alexis had awakened him. The thunderbolt on the Erfurth road struck the death blow of his indecision, and Staupitz and the good Monk with his credo and his faith, had shed the first rays and comforts of salvation upon his pathway. This was all they could do. For all this God used them, but now he was about to make his own Holy word the means of leading Luther out into the light, and onward into the open field of truth not yet reached by either the prelate or the monk. Luther had no Bible. He had access to one in Latin chained to a stone pillar in the convent, a striking emblem of the Bible at that day. Locked up in a dead language, and chained to a cold monastic pillar of dead stone. And yet thank God neither itself dead nor yet bound. Another Bible he could see also in the Latin by going to the library of the University to read it. That was the first copy of the Bible he ever saw, and the first word of the Bible he ever read, from the Bible itself, was the story of Hannah and her child Samuel lent to the Lord forever, and this charmed him. Yet another copy of the sacred word was within his reach by going to a brother monk's cell to read it, in Latin also. A Bible all his own, was a prize too great for his fondest dreams. And yet God gave him one. Staupitz brought him a Bible, a Latin Bible, and presented it to him to be all his own. O, what a treasure. How eagerly he searched it. What delight it gave him. That was the first stone of his great work. That Latin Bible was all his own, and he, albeit he knew it not, was called of God, and was yet to undo the Latin bolts and bars, and break in sunder the monastic chains, and give a good honest German liberty to the blessed Word of God, and bring home its hallowed light to thousands of darkened hearths and homes, and to millions of benighted souls. He himself was first to learn from it the fulness of the blessings of the gospel of peace, and then become the foremost Bible teacher of the world.

Soon he was ordained a priest, and then very soon appointed professor of philosophy in the University of Wittemberg. Staupitz recommended him to Frederick, Elector of Saxony, and the Elector sent him his commission. At once besides the duties of his own professorship, he began giving lectures during an unoccupied hour, upon the Bible, first upon the Psalms, then upon Romans. It was a new thing under the sun. His lectures were clear, warm, stirring, eloquent, powerful. His fame spread out. Students gathered in. Soon by appointment of the Elector, and by the persuasion of Staupitz, and by the hand of Carlstadt he was made "Doctor in Theology," Biblical doctor, and sworn to defend the gospel with all his strength. Now at last he was in the very chair, and the very work designed for him from the first.

But these are the events of his outward life. The life within is that which concerns us. We have seen how Luther came to the faith of the forgiveness of sins. We will now trace the steps of his final and full freedom of soul through faith in the Lord Jesus. One day, while studying Romans for a lecture to the students, the words of the prophet Habakkuk as quoted by Paul, Rom. 1:17 -- "The just shall live by faith," struck their light through his soul. Here was the grand principle of life and righteousness.

He saw it, grasped it, exulted in it, and began teaching it with all the force and fire of his eloquence and genius. There were, it is true, applications of this great principle which he was not yet prepared to see, or to make, both to the church and to his own heart and life. But the principle of justification by faith was no longer a hidden one to him, and it infused a new life and a new power into his soul and his teachings. He applied it with sunbeam clearness to the forgiveness of sins.

He saw how God could be just, and yet justify him that believeth in Jesus, however great his sins might be. Selected not long after to represent seven convents in matter of difference between them and the Vicar

General, at the court of the Roman Pontiff he set off, led by the hand of God into Rome itself, to witness with his own eyes and ears the blasphemous hollowness, and putrid corruptions of the church. On the way he was again taken ill, and again brought to look down into the grave and up to the Judgment Bar of God.

His sins troubled him. The old Erfurth horror of darkness returned upon him. But in the midst of it the words of the prophet, "The just shall live by faith" came again to him with a new force and filled him with the light of heaven. And yet again, while looking upon the ruins of ancient Rome, and almost overwhelmed by the conviction that the Rome which then was would one day be also in ruins, the holy city would pass away, lie in ashes, the same words came to his relief and comfort again, "The just shall live by faith."

The church shall live though Rome should die. Christ lives, and the gates of hell shall never prevail against his church. Luther had not yet learned to take the Lord Jesus for his sanctification. He had one process for the forgiveness of sins, that of faith, and another for the pursuit of holiness, that of works. He believed in Jesus, and trusted that for the sake of Jesus who had died, and risen again for his justification, his sins were all freely forgiven. But he longed for a holy heart and a holy life, and sought them by means not by faith.

The truth that Jesus is all to the sinner, that in Jesus he has all if he takes him for all, he had not yet perceived. Christ a propitiation he accepted, but Christ a sanctification he rejected. Strange that having Christ, and believing in him, and having in him the fountain of holiness, indeed our own holiness, just as really and fully as he is our own sacrifice for sin, we should go about to work out, or seek for holiness of heart imparted to us from God aside from, not in Christ.

Yet so it is. So it was with Luther. At Rome he performed all holy offices, and visited every sacred place, hungering and thirsting after righteousness. One day he sought to secure a special indulgence promised to all holy pilgrims who should climb Pilate's staircase, so called, on their knees. This Pilate's staircase was said to have been transported bodily by miracle, in the night, from Jerusalem to Rome. As Luther crept painfully from stone to stone upward, suddenly he heard, as he thought, a voice of thunder in the depths of his heart, "The just shall live by faith."

These words had often before told him that the just are made alive by faith, but now they thundered through his soul the truth that even so "the just shall live (be kept alive) by faith." By faith they shall be kept by the power of God; by faith they shall make progress onward and upward; by faith their sins shall be forgiven; and by faith their hearts and lives shall be made holy.

Ah! well might the historian say of Luther that "this was a creative word for the reformer," now for the first time he was freed from all false processes of salvation, and fully established in the true. Faith now, as the condition, and Jesus as the salvation he saw was the whole. Full salvation was in Jesus, and Jesus was the soul's in full, through full trust in him. When this word resounded in this new force through his soul, it is no wonder that Luther sprang to his feet upon the stone steps up which he had been crawling like a worm, horrified at himself, and struck with shame for the degradation to which superstition had debased him, and fled from the scene of his folly. Luther himself says, "Then I felt myself born again as a new man, and I entered by an open door into the very paradise of God. From that hour I saw the precious and holy Scriptures with new eyes. I went through the whole Bible. I collected a multitude of passages which taught me what the work of God was. Truly this text of St. Paul was to me the very gate of heaven."

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