

CAN ONE PERSON MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

A Monk, a Door, a War, a Hymn

Romans 1:16–17; 3:21–24; 4:4–5; 8:31–34; Hebrews 11:1–2, 6, 32–38



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Walking the hallways of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., is, in itself, a course in U.S. history. Past presidents, in larger-than-life portraits, speak silently about their times and their unique roles in shaping the nation.

A similar collection of portraits lines the halls of Hebrews 11. These influential men and women, though, are not exhibited because of their leadership skills as much as for their courageous faith. Here are paintings of Abel . . . Enoch . . . Noah . . . Abraham. So long is the corridor that the writer of Hebrews was unable to describe all the pictures it contains:

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets. (Hebrews 11:32)

Even the prophets don't end the list! We could continue the collection with William Tyndale, John Wesley, George Whitefield, and others.

In the previous lesson, we studied several faithful men from the Reformation era. Time failed us, though, to tell the whole story of the greatest difference maker of that period, Martin Luther. Let's pause for a while at his portrait and draw courage from his example of faith.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Monk

The son of a poor German miner, Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483, one hour before midnight—appropriately, the eleventh hour.

The church was no friend to Luther. It should have been a shelter, offering comfort and direction for earnest pilgrims like him. Instead, corruption had all but crumbled its ornately carved façade. Luther observed three contributing factors:

- *Hypocrisy and moral debauchery among the professional clergy*
- *Biblical illiteracy among the people*
- *Unabashed materialism among the clergy*



Quotable

*Our motive is
to be right,
true to Scripture,
standing firm.*

*If necessary,
standing alone.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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Frustrated and disillusioned, Luther found himself drowning in a churning sea of legalism. But through Luther's study of Scripture, particularly Paul's letter to the Romans, God drew him out of the abyss and set him on the solid ground of faith in Christ alone.

At long last, the truth of God's justification of sinners broke through the clouds that overshadowed Luther's life. No amount of good works can earn Christ's righteousness—it is a gift received by faith.

2. A Door

Luther, who had received remission of sin as a free gift from God, could not stand by and watch religious charlatans extort the people by hawking spiritual favors (indulgences) for money. So on October 31, 1517, at noon, he nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany, unwittingly launching the Reformation.

He chose that day, the eve of All Saints' Day, because he knew that people from all over the region would visit the church during the festival.

At first no one challenged Luther, but as the papers were copied and distributed throughout the country, the spark grew into a blaze that neither the world nor the pope could ignore.

3. A War

Luther stood firm as the church pummeled him with artillery fire in debates and councils—called *diets*. At the famous diet in the city of Worms, Luther was called upon to renounce his “heretical” theology. He announced in a clear voice:

I must be bound by those Scriptures which have been brought forward by me; yes, my conscience has been taken captive by these words of God. I cannot revoke anything, nor do I wish to; since to go against one's conscience is neither safe nor right: Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.²

4. A Hymn

Luther was despised, threatened, and excommunicated. Yet the gospel message never wavered on his lips as the cry of the Reformation sounded forth: *sola fide*, “faith alone.”



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Luther often expressed his faith in God by writing hymns. Of his thirty-seven hymns, his flagship was “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” the victory anthem of the Reformation. Based on Psalm 46, this song of courageous faith declares the reformer’s confidence in God, an unassailable refuge.

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe—
His craft and pow’r are great,
And armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing,
Were not the right man on our side,
The man of God’s own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He—
Lord Sabaoth His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.³



LET’S LIVE IT

For years, Luther trembled before the Lord, even as today you might. Then, the light of God’s grace warmed Luther’s heart. May God’s truth also warm your heart and provide you with peace.

How is God’s grace manifested in your life? What steps can you take this week to demonstrate grace to others?

ENDNOTES

1. Martin Luther, as quoted by Philip Schaff in *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7, *Modern Christianity: The German Reformation*, 2nd ed., rev. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 106.
2. Martin Luther, as quoted by Harry Emerson Fosdick, ed., in *Great Voices of the Reformation* (New York: Random House, 1952), 80.
3. Martin Luther, trans. Frederick H. Hedge, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” in *Hymns for the Family of God* (Nashville: Paragon Associates, 1976), no. 118.



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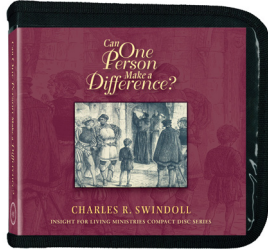
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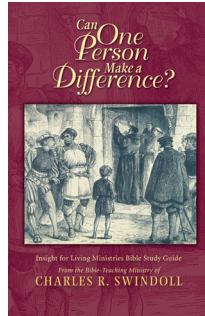
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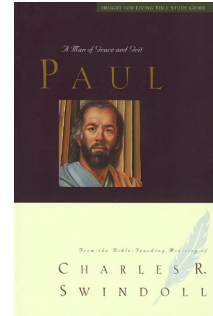
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