

LETTERS FROM GRANDPA # 158

Dearest grandchild,

Just finished the biography of Martin Luther by Eric Metaxas. As always, his writings are well researched and readable. Since the book is almost 500 pages, there are MANY things I would like to share. Today's letter, however, will only deal with Luther's vow to become a monk. His integrity is worthy of emulation. While Luther later came to the place where he was an opponent of both the Catholic Church and the monastic system, his commitment to become a monk reflects both his rational approach to life as well as his own personal integrity.

This momentous decision by Luther was not made in a vacuum. Here is some background. Luther had achieved his baccalaureate degree in 1502 after only three semesters at Erfurt. He was ready to take his master's exam in 1504 but as you had to be 22 in order to do so, his exams were postponed until January 1505. Luther had planned on becoming a lawyer and purchased his *Corpus Juris*. This was an expensive but essential text book for every law student.

The brilliant Luther, however, was constantly open to the leading of God in his life. This struggle is described by the German word *Anfechtung* which has no real English equivalent. The word *fetchen* means to fight or to duel with an opponent. Thus Luther at this time was struggling with his own thoughts much as Jacob wrestled with an angel at Peniel (Gen. 32). Only the year before as he was traveling home, his sword accidentally severed a main artery in his leg. It was a life threatening injury and Luther feared that he was dying. He desperately applied pressure to the wound trying to stanch the flow of blood. After being sewed up by a doctor the wound opened again making the prospect of bleeding to death an ever present reality. During the many days of convalescence he had ample time for his *Anfechtung*. His thoughts were made even more spiritual by the fact that two young lawyers at Erfurt had recently died of the plague. As if this were not enough, two of Luther's fellow students had also died. One of them, Hieronymus Buntz, had taken part in Luther's own Master's Examination. Facing his own mortality was a sobering reality.

Thus the stage was set for his Damascus Road experience. It was on July 2, 1505 that Luther was traveling through the forest. He was only 6 miles from his home at Erfurt when he found himself on the wet ground in the midst of a violent thunderstorm. He huddled in fear seeking refuge from the powerful winds and torrential rain. As the thunder rolled and the lightening flashed it seemed as if God was trying to get his attention. He did! Suddenly a bolt of lightening struck so close to Luther that he cried out "Hilf du, Sankt Anna!" (Help me Saint Anne). Then he uttered the words that would change both his life and much of the world. He promised that if his life was spared he would become a monk and devote the rest of his life to serving God.

The Scriptures teach that it is better to not make a vow, and to make one and not keep it (Eccl. 5:5). We cannot but therefore admire Luther for keeping his vow. Without even consulting his father who had financed his education and had high hopes for his young scholar, he sold his *Corpus Juris* and presented himself at the door of the Augustinian cloister of Erfurt. He had put his hand to the plow and did not look back.

One of the ways that God guides us is by means of our conscience. If we deliberately do what we believe to be wrong we can destroy this vital line of communication through which God can give us guidance. The most hardened criminal once found it difficult to steal some tinsel trinket worth less than a dollar. The more we abuse our conscience, however, the more calloused it becomes. Ultimately it can be so damaged that it is useless. The Bible describes this condition as having your conscience seared with a hot iron (1 Tim. 4:2). Such a condition destroys our contact with God and makes it impossible to renew us to repentance (Heb. 6:6).

Let us all therefore have a tender conscience like Luther. In some respects our lives are like a computer. When the computer is working properly the marker moves on the screen. Usually the marker has to be moved around to arrive where it belongs. As long as it responds, however, it can be guided. This is the way God wants us to be. The fact that Luther was submissive to God, and willing to move, was a key component to the tremendous impact of his amazing life.

Remember! “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” (Proverbs 3:5-6 KJV)

I love you,

Grandpa Boyce