What Drove Luther's Hammer?

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We will together take a very abbreviated look at what led Luther down the long road to the discovery of the Gospel. Truth be told, the content of what I am telling will contain *nothing* that is original on my part. My words are totally parasitic on, a distillation of, the work of my betters: respected Luther scholars Roland Bainton, E. Gordon Rupp, James Kittelson, Philip Watson, Graham Tomlin, Jaroslav Pelikan, James Nestingen, & others – incl. Episcopal Professor of Philosophy, Philip Cary!) To those of you *already* familiar with Luther’s story, my apologies.

What I’ll say will necessarily be *highly* selective, will omit large portions and important material and focus on the subject, “What Drove Luther’s Hammer?” Still, *some* background is necessary. A *little* about the age in which Luther lived. And a *little* about Luther’s family, his upbringing. And at least a *little* about Luther’s education. A *little more* about his life as a monk. And finally, a *little* about the nature of the Gospel Luther discovered in the writings of St. Paul.

I – A **LITTLE**  ABOUT THE AGE

The overarching view of the unity of all of life was that of the Roman church. There was one socio-religious body with 2 supposedly equal sides: church and state. But finally, the church was *superior* as bearer of God’s law (Scripture and holy tradition). All questions—including those of law, economics, politics, morality—were decided according to God’s law as *interpreted by the church*. It was difficult, really, to find *any* legitimate independence for the state. The Roman church was coterminous with Western civilization.
But the façade of a “unified Christian civilization” was under pressure from new forces. *Externally*, the rise of national states, an economy changing from “feudal” to “mercantile,” and new ideas from the Renaissance movement were all growing. *Internally*, the Roman church made two great blunders, and at a time when there were three weak popes. And these caused irreparable damage to the moral authority of the Roman church—much more damage than the new, external forces.

First was the so-called “Babylonian Captivity” of the church. The papacy moved away from Rome to Avignon (France) – a horrible shock to western Europe. The moral basis of the papacy was, for the first time, subjected to serious questioning.

Second was the so-called “Great Schism.” or even 3!—men all claiming to be the Vicar of Christ on earth! Nations lined up behind the various “popes.” The question naturally arose, “Which one is right?” And if none was right, why was any necessary? In reaction there arose the “Conciliar movement.” Conciliarists maintained that the general counsel of the church is of higher authority than the Pope. The Pope would be then thought of as a king who ruled supreme—but not alone! He ruled through the “assemblies of the church.” If the pope went wrong, the Council had the right to depose him. If the councils went wrong, later councils could correct the matter. Scripture and previous councils were now the source of authority (rather than past or present decisions by the papacy! (The bull *Execrabilis* (Pius II, 1460) condemned it and all other such “erroneous and detestable” competitors to papal supremacy.)
II – A LITTLE ABOUT LUTHER’S FAMILY, UPBRINGING

If, as the saying goes, “... the child is the father of the man,” we need to say at least a little about Luther’s home, upbringing. Luther was the second son in a family of eight children. His father and mother were sturdy, stocky, swarthy German Bauern. The atmosphere of the family was that of the peasantry: rugged, rough, at times course, credulous and devout. Often in the beliefs of these untutored folk, elements of the old German paganism blended with the Christian story. Woods and winds and water were peopled by elves, gnomes, fairies, mermen & mermaids, sprites and witches. Witchcraft was taken for granted throughout Europe at that time, and young Luther had ample opportunity to witness the mischief and grief of evil spirits, and he soon learned the marvelous power of the church to control the demons. Luther carried over a good many typical German peasant superstitions of his day (for example, Luther’s mother believed they played pranks, stealing eggs, milk & butter). In a more serious vein, she blamed the death of one of her sons on a neighbor, whom she considered a witch!

Luther’s father, a poor struggling but conscientious laborer, raised himself by sheer industry from being a laborer, a copper miner, to being a part-owner in a little foundry. As was the case with most medieval peasants, Gross-Hans Luther had a long and terrible economic struggle in order to get ahead, and he he managed to achieve some little security.

Scholars tell us that there was nothing remarkable about Luther’s home life. His upbringing was fairly typical for his day. Children were subjected to a very stern upbringing. Typical of the age, the switch and beatings were the most common way
to raise a family, and young Martin received his share. Luther never forgot the harsh treatment, yet genuine concern, on the part of his parents. And, as Luther began to show academic promise, he became highly esteemed at home (his father no longer called him by the familiar German “Du,” but by the more formal (and respectful) “Sie.”

What about the religious convictions or pieties of Luther’s family? Again, nothing unusual. His parents were God-fearing but not unusually devout. As most children of his day, Luther learned the Creed, Commandments, and Lord’s Prayer at home.

Overall, Yale historian Dr. Roland Bainton tells his reader, “We know this much. Luther imbibed a religion in which one had to strive for future salvation, just as one had to work for material survival.”

III – A LITTLE ABOUT LUTHER’S EDUCATION

Education in the schools reinforced the training of the home. Children were instructed in sacred song, trained to sing Psalms and hymns. They attended masses and Vespers. Dr. Bainton tells his reader that “… the entire training of home, school, and university was designed to instill fear of God and reverence for the church.”

Schools of that day were not tender, but neither were they brutal. Surely pretty strict, at least by our standards. Teaching was by drill, punctuated by the rod. Luther remembered being soundly beaten for failing to conjugate a Latin verb which he had not yet learned! The object was to impart a knowledge of the Latin tongue. And the boys did not resent this because knowledge of Latin was useful – it was the language of the church, of law, of diplomacy, of international relations, of scholarship
– even of travel. Luther was devoted to his studies and became highly proficient—“word perfect”—in Latin and German grammar.

Early on, Luther’s father had decided not to follow the norm of having his son follow him in his vocation, but instead to back his son’s education. Luther would enter law school, perhaps marry well, and become financially stable enough to support his mother and father in their old age. At great cost, his father “busted” for expensive law texts and gave them to his son.

Luther was in the University of Erfurt by age 17. That university was not yet touched by the influence of the Renaissance. (Luther later remarked that the most popular courses were those offered in the inns and taverns (many students, including Luther, referred to the university as “a bawdy house and a beer house!”)

As in all European universities of that time, Aristotle was the chief authority. First, students in the Arts tackled logic, dialectics, rhetoric and grammar (all tools for students’ future education) and all this “through the lens of Aristotle.” In their second year, they read Aristotle’s texts on ethics, politics, economics and “the study of abstract ideas and realities” (“things beyond physics; “meta-physics”). Finally, students moved on to music, mathematics, geometry and astronomy. After the status of “Master” (good general training in all the liberal arts), one could move on to specialize in a field: e.g., theology, law, or medicine.

Luther’s first year was nothing special (he finished his first year 30th out of 57), but then his ability began to emerge. He was (finally) one of the only 17 students (out of an original 300) who graduated as Master of Arts (1505). And he built quite a
reputation among his fellow students as one of the finest disputants. They dubbed him “the philosopher!”

Luther was, as a young man, in many ways an ordinary, if gifted, student: sociable, musical, popular, pious. He was ordinarily rollicking, fond of music, proficient on the lute, and enamored of the German landscape (he called Erfurt “a new Bethlehem!”)

IV – LUTHER’S ANFECHTUNGEN

In one respect, however, Luther stood apart from his fellows: his inner bouts with the Anfechtungen that plagued him throughout his life. The word has no English equivalent, but it is stronger than “temptation” or “trial.” Closer would be “assault” or “attack” – terrifying ordeals, bouts of depression, despair, perhaps what people of earlier centuries called “melancholia?”

The church through her services, her monks, her clergy, and civilization and culture through its art, music, education, customs and morals constantly kept before the individual the pressing choice between heaven and hell. Many of the most popular handbooks of the day had “death” as their central motif (e.g., ars moriendi, The Art of Dying). Their theme was dread, and they graphically depicted Christ as the Judge. Luther often wondered whether God really did hold good intentions toward him or not. He sensed deeply the stare of Christ the Judge standing over him, demanding of him an impossible level of inner purity. This state of uncertainty seems to have been a fundamental experience of Luther’s throughout his time as a monk and beyond. At times, Luther could not help fearing that these feelings were evidence that he was not one of God’s elect, but rather among those destined to be
damned. The young Luther’s depressions/anxieties were tied up with the theology of the late medieval Roman church. (They were not the sort of attacks that would be “cured” by modern psychotropic drugs, a better diet or an exercise regimen!) They had at their center Luther’s fear of God and His everlasting condemnation, fear of Christ the Judge.

The tensions which Medieval theology deliberately induced play a part in these Anfechtungen of Luther’s. The theology of Rome played alternately upon fear and hope, oscillated between God’s wrath and God’s mercy. God was portrayed now as the Father, next as the wielder of the thunder. Thankfully, His anger could be softened by the intercession of His kindlier Son, by His mother, or by her mother (St. Anne). Little wonder that Luther had been worried about the state of his soul!

After only two months of attending lectures in law, Luther went home for a visit. We don’t know why, but Luther later wrote that it was fear over the condition of his soul. During his return to Erfurt, a sudden storm arose, lightening flashed, and the air pressure of a bolt of lightening suddenly knocked him to the ground. In terror, he cried out, “St. Anne, save me! I will become a monk!” (The thought of sudden, unexpected death terrified every medieval Christian, because it would not allow a thoughtful and thorough last confession to a priest.) It was no easy decision, for even after uttering the vow, he carefully considered his obligation to it. Though his father was angry (news of what Martin had done had reached his father, who was enraged when he heard it) and though several of his teachers thought his vow was not binding, young Luther could not avoid going through with his promise. He gave a farewell party with his friends, gave away his musical instruments and his Roman law books. Then, with heaviness of heart, he cleared up all of his affairs at the
University, and in the Fall of 1505 he appeared at the door of the Augustinian Order’s monastery in Erfurt—the most rigorous of the local monastic groups.

If the question is, “What Drove Luther’s Hammer?” we’ll find much of it here. Like everyone else in the Middle Ages, Luther knew what to do about his plight. The wise course, the secure course, the way of certainty was to “take the cowl.” Why did Luther drop out of law school and join a monastery? For exactly the same reason as thousands of others, namely, to save his soul!

**IV – A LITTLE ABOUT LUTHER THE MONK**

Medieval monasticism reflected the deepest insight of the Roman church concerning the relation of the holy God to man the sinner. In the last analysis, a holy, righteous, and just God could have fellowship with, could accept, only a holy, just, and good man. But how could such a God of perfection accept as His own a sinful man? The real problem was to make a man sufficiently holy, so that his acceptance by God if not certain, was at least highly probable.

“[Luther] set himself to the pursuit of holiness. Monasticism constituted such a quest; Luther looked upon the cloister as the higher righteousness.” (Bainton)

His teachers, following the Bible, taught that God demanded absolute righteousness (e.g., “Be ye perfect ...” – [Matt 5:48](https://www.bible.com/bible/111/mat.5.48)). People needed to love God absolutely & their neighbors as themselves. They should have the unshakable faith of Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son.
Hence the demand that the monk fulfill all the laws and commands of God, including poverty, chastity, and obedience. The life of a monk was terribly hard, but people of Luther’s day “knew” that it was pleasing to God. Its benefits were “certain” and sure! Were the monastics aware of the great gulf between God and man? Absolutely! Too, they knew that the fluctuation between despair and hope, between unbearable demand and partial fulfillment, would produce doubts and spiritual torment in many of the good brothers. But this would only serve to keep them from complacency and self-righteousness. Once their sinfulness was fully exposed, there were ample ways to reassure the weak in times of trouble. At the center of assuring them was the sacrament of penance. The sinner confessed to a priest, was forgiven (absolved), then performed penitential acts that completed the process. People were to repent in a fully contrite manner—not for the purpose of saving themselves. But Luther knew that in the midst of this most crucial act, he was at his most selfish! He was confessing his sins and performing his penance out of the intensely human instinct to save his own skin!! Yet because of the human tendency to sin, one could hardly confess enough. This critical issue remained vivid in Luther’s mind. (He later commented, “If one were to confess his sins in a timely manner, he would have [had] to carry a confessor in his pocket!”) When Luther tried to avail himself of this comfort, but it did not produce the desired results. Luther was not comforted. For example, Luther confessed every sin he could recall, but he found (after leaving his confessor) that he had forgotten others. And sins not confessed were not covered by the absolution. “Yet my conscience would never give me assurance, but I was always doubting and said ‘You did not perform that correctly. You were not contrite enough. You left that out of your confession.’” How then could he stand before God?
Monasticism provided a variety of ways in which man could wash out his sin & improve his spiritual estate. The monk could fast, pray, meditate, perform mass, beat his body, & engage in other physical-spiritual exercises. Out of this would come the defeat of the body and of pride. Luther tried this, sometimes to an extreme. He fasted, kept himself engaged in endless prayers, tried to lose himself in study and in work [but] at best, it brought only temporary relief.

“He fasted, sometimes three days on end without a crumb. The seasons of fasting were more consoling to him than Easter. He laid upon himself vigils and prayers in excess of those stipulated by the Rule. He cast off the blankets permitted him and well-nigh froze himself to death.” (Bainton)

Luther summed up his life as a monk: “I was a good monk, and I kept the [R]ule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.”

In addition to an acute sense of the holiness of God, Luther had a brutally honest picture of himself as a creature. He knew all too well that it is easy for man to picture himself “in the best possible light.” Man is usually willing to forgive himself, and then rest assured that God, too, has forgiven him. “So long as one does the best that is in him,” man is sure it is enough. But Luther was too sensitive to be satisfied with such “answers.” Luther knew that many times man deliberately & soon blotted sins out of
memory. What Luther saw was a self-centered sinful man holding sway under the cover & pretense of monastic holiness.

In the end, even his beloved Staupitz could not understand Luther. He looked upon the young man as an outstanding, devout, holy, gifted monk who was bothered by temporary pangs of conscience. So he did his best to “aid the young man through a troubled period.” And his counsel, his “answers,” did help Luther from time to time. Staupitz counseled Luther that he was trying too hard to please God. Or that “God was not angry with Luther, but instead Luther was angry with God.” Or that Luther could not live without his torments, that they were “his food and drink.” Such counsel helped Luther, turned him from contemplation of the stern, inscrutable God who predestines the fate of all to the contemplation of the wounded Christ who suffered for sinners. Still, all of Staupitz’s “answers” were essentially Roman ones.

With Luther, Staupitz tried to shift the emphasis away from man’s will striving to perform perfect acts acceptable to God to (instead) man quietly waiting an influx of divine grace (certain to come through the sacraments). But for Luther, the consequence was the same: Man was enabled to perform works of merit which completed the work begun by Christ on the cross. He found that “depending on grace” (as opposed to a striving of will) still did not make him the kind of man who could be assured of God’s acceptance.

It was the same with Staupitz’s counsel to embrace “the mystic way”: “Just love God.” Luther reacted, “Love God? Sometimes I hate him!” It seemed to Luther that the vicious circle simply started from another point— and with the same consequences. If the goal of grace given was “in order that man might become
holy,” what happens when such holiness is not achieved? Does God continue to offer His forgiveness, His mercy, and His grace to those who once received it but apparently did not make of it what they ought to have achieved? That was the problem that none of Rome’s “answers” solved!

All such drastic methods gave no sense of inner tranquility. Luther was plagued by one problem: Human beings were incapable of the selfless acts and states of mind the Scriptures required. The purpose of Luther’s striving was to compensate for his sins, but he could never rest secure that the ledger was balanced. (Bainton)

Luther started to think that perhaps he was one of those predestined to be damned.

A critical moment came: Luther’s superiors (Staupitz, in particular) ordered Luther to take his doctorate and become a professor of Bible at Wittenberg University. Luther resisted (“It will be the death of me!”), finally relented. Dr. Kittleson comments, “[The order to Luther to pursue his doctorate in Bible] was one of the most brilliant or stupid decisions in the history of Latin Christianity” [!]  

If it was Luther’s fears and anxieties that drove him into the cloister (and, as we have seen, they did!), those intensified for him during his time as a monk. But the command to study academic theology meant that he could investigate his struggles intellectually.

He soon acquired his mature self-identity as a professor, a Doctor of Sacred Scripture.
V—FINALLY, A LITTLE ON THE “TURN”

Luther’s early doctrine of justification 1516, (Commentary on Romans) was a form of self-torture. The problem was how to come to love God unselfishly—to reach a state of pure love of God for God’s own sake. This he had learned not only from St. Augustine, but from St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Still, Luther knew that we children of Adam were “curved in on ourselves,” sought only ourselves. The only remedy for the evil self-love is self-hatred. He concluded that this was the essential road to salvation: agreeing with God’s verdict, pleasing Him by agreeing with the rightness of His wrath against us, to be willing even to be damned. Justification is agreeing with its opposite: agreeing with God’s wrath against us, feeling that in our hearts. The just man always accuses himself.

The problem was that this led to deeper fear of God rather than greater love for him, thus setting up a vicious cycle of fear, resentment, and despair, leading to anger and hatred of God. What was missing was the Gospel as God’s kind Word of promise.

Later, Luther felt compelled to again turn to St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, particularly to wrestle with the phrase, “the righteousness of God.” “… the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” (Rom 1:16-17 and Hab 2:4)

Luther’s first “take” on the verse was that the Gospel merely confirmed the dreaded juridical interpretation of “God’s righteousness” as demand—a revelation of the punitive righteousness of God, no more than God’s means of further torturing and
tormenting men who are already fearfully burdened with Original Sin and the Ten Commandments. Still, Luther would not let go of the passage. He struggled and raged against the demands of a God Who keeps demanding that which man cannot give—and then damns him for not giving it!

Parenthetically, when I was a young catechumen and my Pastor was explicating the details of what Luther finally saw, I could not see it. I didn’t know enough about Luther to fill a gnat’s navel, but Luther’s discovered “answer” seemed to me no answer at all, but rather just more of the problem! I was too afraid to say out loud what I was thinking (“That’s not only not an answer! It’s the problem!”) (Remember this, if you’re a pastor or teacher, because I’m not the only one who sees your “answer” (and Luther’s) as the opposite of what you’re trying to get across!)

How so? How was I, as a young 12-year old catechumen, unknowingly retracing Luther’s first thoughts on those verses in Romans? During his early years, whenever Luther came to the famous “Reformation text”—Rom 1:17—his eyes were drawn not to the word faith, but to the word righteous. Who, after all, could “live by faith?” Only those who were already righteous! The text was clear: “… the righteous shall live by faith.” But young Luther could not live by faith because he was not righteous – and he knew it! (He later remarked, “I hated that [phrase], “the righteousness of God,” by which I had been taught according to the custom & use of all teachers … [that] God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.”) Similarly, I heard St. Paul’s quote of Habbakuk (“The righteous shall live by faith”) like this: For those who have achieved righteousness, their life is characterized as daily living by faith. Big deal! I hadn’t achieved righteousness (knew I probably never would), so the “living by faith”
was a moot point, at least in my case. I couldn’t qualify on the opening condition (“righteousness”)! So the latter was completely irrelevant to me! Q.E.D.!

Now let me tell you what I wish my Pastor had then said to us in confirmation class, how I wish he would have explained the verses in Romans & Habbakuk. It will probably put every exegete into a complete lather, cause them to hyperventilate or faint. But I attempt it anyway. And I think it’s not far removed from what Luther finally “cracked” and saw.

How about this “translation?” “The one who drops dead to, gives up on, his or her [supposed, but really icky] ‘righteousness,’ who shifts instead to trusting only in the Messiah’s righteousness imputed to him, that sinner will live.”

Gratuitously (freely) that sinner is forgiven for all of his sin, reconciled to God, adopted into the family of God as His child and heir, given eternal life— the whole schmoodle! And that “being turned away from” obsession with our ‘icky’ righteousness to Jesus Christ’s [genuine, but “alien”] righteousness as the onlyhope you and I have, is what Paul calls “faith.” (Think of the old King James translation of the verse in Jeremiah: “Turn Thou me and I shall be turned.”) “We is da turnee and God is da Turnor!” So we get no credit for saving faith whatsoever. Like Peter’s confession as to who Jesus was, it is a gift to us from heaven: “… flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but My Father in heaven.” Next, the sinner is made alive (after an “unlife” from the time of his or her conception to his or her present, a being nothing but dead!”) But even this “being made alive” is not a part of what justifies sinners. That’s Rome’s position (what we call “regeneration” and “sanctification” is what they call “justification” (it has, as part and parcel of it, what
they call “the renewal”). Now I won’t attribute this Roman view to Baptists who stress the importance of “being born again,” but I’ll leave that for you to evaluate on your own later on! American evangelical “answers” are often the equivalent of 16th-century Rome’s “answers.” And those “answers” are, down deep, against the answers Luther and Calvin gave—and both Luther and Calvin thought they saw their answers directly, in the text of St. Paul.

Luther, in grasping the meaning of “justification,” saw it not as anything “new,” but as a recovery of something long lost. The heart of the Gospel has to do not with what God demands, but with what He gives to man in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here Luther leaned heavily on St. Paul. The “righteousness of God” that saves sinners is not an “active” one (something man does), but is rather entirely passive! (What is gratuitously, graciously, freely given by God to man the sinner). A man is not righteous because of what he achieves, but because of what Jesus Christ did for him in His death and resurrection. Man simply trusts God at His Word, hopes in the inscripturated promise of God! He trusts that God in Christ has completely accepted him while he is still a sinner, has forgiven his sin and instantly judged the sinner as completely acquitted, given him eternal life—and all this based solely on what Christ has done outside of him and for him—not “in him.”

No act of will can bring a man to this estate (That would mean, again, that man would still be trusting in his own efforts!) Instead, when man is “at the end of his tether,” seeing himself as he really is (that is, a vain, self-centered, capricious creature, pretending to be the Creator of his own life & destiny)—precisely at that point of his sinfulness, God finds him & accepts him. How? In Christ, in Christ’s
identity as God and man, in Christ’s substitutionary death for him, in Christ’s promise(s).

For the first time in his life, Luther discovered what “peace” meant. And it was not some self-induced peace of mind, or even a profound resting secure in an ancient and hallowed tradition, but rather a childlike trust in God’s own promises in Scripture, in texts that spoke of God’s saving action in Jesus Christ. It rested not on personal vision or ecstasy, not on a miracle or on the adjustment of Luther’s personality to the tensions he experienced. Finally, the Gospel is not about man at all (except in the sense of the God-man, Jesus Christ), is not about merit or effort, but rather about Jesus’ struggle with wrath and judgment, with Jesus’ victory over sin, death and the devil.

Luther describes for us this “turn” in his own words [words probably already familiar to many of you]:

“I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, ‘the justice of God,’ because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage [H]im. Therefore, I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against [H]im. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.”
Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven...

If you have a true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God’s heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This is to behold God in faith that you should look upon [H]is fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor unrighteousness. He who sees God as angry does not see [H]im rightly but looks only on a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across [H]is face.”