

Martin Luther

Father of the Protestant Reformation

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Psalm 46:1

Play can be used for: Reformation Day (October 31)
(Upper elementary or middle school level)

Background Information

Imagine a time when there were no Bibles because the Roman Catholic Church made it illegal for individuals to read the Bible. It was at the end of the 1400's, and the people were very ignorant of many of the truths of the Bible that are now common knowledge to believers. Because of this it was a time of spiritual darkness. The church was the only source of knowledge about God and matters of faith. Although much of the church's teaching was wrong, God's spiritual light was still burning. Men and women called reformers, who read the Bible for themselves, saw that the church was corrupt, and tried to reform it. At the same time, these reformers began to teach the people directly from the Bible so they would know the truth, and not walk in darkness. Martin Luther (Luder) was one such reformer in Germany in the early 16th century. In time the spiritual light grew brighter, all over Europe, since God's truth was becoming known and practiced by more and more people. This event later became known as the Protestant Reformation.

Four of the key truths that were at the heart of the Protestant Reformation:

- Sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone (God's truth is based upon the Bible alone, with nothing added or subtracted from it.)
- Sola Christos*—Christ alone (It is Christ alone who saves us.)
- Sola Gratia*—Grace alone (It is only God's grace that redeems us.)
- Sola Fide*—Faith alone (It is not faith plus our works that brings us into right relationship with God, but faith alone in the finished work of Christ.)

The 30-minute video, *Martin! God Loves You*, produced by Morning Light Media, gives additional helpful background information, and it is very appropriate for children.

Props

- Necklace nametag for each character
- Medieval music (Early Latin Church music) and CD player
- A podium or music stand
- A chair and table with a candle
- Black Bible and a set of old-looking books
- Lightening bolt made from cardboard
- Pointer for the Headmaster
- Frayed rope "whip"
- A black tam
- Metal coffer (moneybox) and some coins
- The 95 Theses written on a long paper scroll (printed from the Internet and taped to the scroll)

- Wooden hammer or mallet
- Three Indulgences (3x4 slips of paper declaring, “Your sins are forgiven.”)
- A wooden bench to serve as a church kneeling bench
- A large basket holding a black robe and belt
- Three small New Testaments with black covers

Characters and Costumes

(If you have a smaller group of children, you can just have one narrator and one Luther. If you have more children than parts, then divide the narrator and Luther parts.)

- **Narrator #1 and #2** in modern clothes
- **Narrator #3**, if needed
- **Luther’s Mother** in a Middle Ages costume: loose-fitting long sleeve blouse (chemise) and solid color long skirt
- **Luther’s Father** in a Middle Ages costume: loose-fitting long sleeve, drop yoke shirt and pants with a belt over the shirt
- **Headmaster** in black robe (choir robes work well)
- **Martin Luther** in loose-fitting long sleeve drop yoke shirt and knee breeches
- **John Tetzel** in a scarlet robe
- **Peasant man** in muslin long sleeve tattered shirt and knee breeches
- **Peasant woman** in long sleeve blouse (chemise) and tattered solid color long skirt
- **Church official #1** in a scarlet robe and tam
- **Church official #2** in a black robe

Blocking

Play Medieval music before the play begins and during the **Narrator’s** first comments.

Place a music stand or podium far stage right for the **Narrator** and the lightening bolt beside the podium.

Position a table to serve as a desk, with a candle, some books and a black Bible, the three small New Testaments, a black tam, and a chair stage right of center stage. Beside the chair place the basket holding the following props: a black robe and belt, the rope “whip,” the 95 Theses scroll, and a hammer.

Tape a Wittenburg church “door” to the far wall stage left, with a sign *Wittenburg Church* over the “door”.

Place a kneeling bench beside the church door.

When every prop is in place, the narrator enters and stands at far stage right at the podium.

Play: Martin Luther Father of the Protestant Reformation

Narrator:

Welcome to Germany in the late 1400’s. You are about to hear the story of a man’s struggle to find salvation, and then his attempts to help others find the true salvation in Christ that he had found. While on his spiritual journey he discovered truths from God’s Word that were not recognized by the church, and had not been taught for hundreds of years. The Roman Catholic Church opposed Martin Luther for teaching things contrary to its doctrine. Luther did what he thought God called him to do. By doing so he helped many people return to the Biblical faith of the Early Church. The people who protested against the errors in the Roman Catholic Church were called “Protestants”. Their efforts to Biblically

reform the church gave that time of history the name “Reformation”. Thus Luther, and other reformers, started the Protestant Reformation. When the Jamestown settlers and the Pilgrims came to America in the 1600’s, they brought with them Protestant Christianity. They wanted this new nation to be a nation who honored God as its Lord. Their vision came to pass! We who live in America today, and enjoy the liberty that the gospel brought, have Luther and other reformers to thank!

(Martin Luther, Luther’s Father and Luther’s Mother walk onto stage and stand center stage.)

Narrator: Martin Luther was born in 1483 in Eisenback, Germany, shortly before Columbus’ famous voyage to the New World. His parents pondered about his life:

Luther’s Mother: *(Looks at Luther’s Father)* Martin has the potential of doing something great with his life.

Luther’s Father: *(Nods)* I agree; I don’t think that I will send him to work in my copper mines. Instead, I will send him off to school.

(Both parents exit the stage, and Martin Luther walks over to his desk and sits down to study.)

Narrator: Martin loved school, especially the subject of music. His teachers were very strict, and sometimes cruel. But the headmaster of his school always started his class by saying:

Headmaster: *(Walks on stage and spreads his arms out, looking at Martin Luther, as if addressing his pupils)* God may intend many of you to be burgomasters, chancellors, scholars, and rulers.

Narrator: The headmaster thought that his pupils would do great things when they grew up. Luther wondered:

Luther: *(Tilts head and thinks out loud)* Maybe I’ll do something very important one day.

(Headmaster exits the stage.)

Narrator: At the age of seventeen, Luther went off to attend the University of Erfurt. He said,

Luther: I have to study very hard, especially to learn Latin. I’m very ashamed, though, to admit that my college nickname is ‘beer bag’.

Narrator: After three years, Luther graduated.

(Luther stands at his desk and Luther’s Father walks back onto stage toward Luther.) Luther wondered,

Luther: Now what should I do with my life?

Luther’s Father: Son, I really think that you should study law and become a lawyer. That is a proud and dignified occupation.

Luther: Yes Father, if that is your desire, I will do it. I respect you, and I trust your judgment.

(Luther’s Father bows and exits the stage.)

Narrator: One day, one of Luther’s closest friends was killed. The grieving Luther was greatly troubled and thought:

Luther: I wonder what will happen to me when I die? Will I live on, somewhere else?

(Luther begins slowly walking across the stage)

Narrator: Shortly afterward he was walking home through some woods. A thunderstorm suddenly developed, and a lightening bolt struck the ground right beside him. *(Throws down the lightning bolt at Luther's feet.)*
Falling to the ground and thinking that he was going to die, he cried out in terror:

Luther: Help me Saint Anne; I will become a monk! *(Puts on the monk's black robe and belt from the basket beside the chair and kneels down in prayer and petition.)*

Narrator: It is a common practice in the Roman Catholic Church to ask the "saints" for assistance. Luther fulfilled his promise and became a monk, an Augustinian friar. Yet, at the age of twenty-one Luther was in a spiritual crisis.

Luther: I have grown up in the church, I have learned to fear God, obey the church authorities, and believe in heaven and hell. Yet I don't feel that I am really forgiven for my sins. As an Augustinian friar, I have fasted for days, I have stayed awake all night in prayer, I have repented of my sins for hours, and I even beat myself. *(Beats himself with a frayed rope "whip")*

Narrator: Why did Luther do these things?

Luther: *(Addresses the audience)* To please God, of course, so He will take away my sins!

Narrator: But after all this Luther still did not feel forgiven! Luther confessed:

Luther: I am depressed. As hard as I try, I never can please God. I hate to admit it, but sometimes I don't even like God.

Narrator: *(Addresses the audience)* What could help Martin Luther?

(Allow time for audience to respond as Luther walks back to his desk, sits down, and opens his Bible.)

One day, while studying the Bible, Luther read Romans 1:17:

Luther: "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith." *(Says the following slowly . . .)* "The just shall live by faith; . . . the just shall live by faith."

(Luther jumps up excitedly) I see it! It is not man's good works in addition to God's grace, that brings salvation. It is God's grace alone! When Jesus died on the cross, He paid the total price for my salvation. I am saved by faith in Jesus and what He did for me!

Narrator: Luther was so happy; he felt that he had entered paradise.

(Luther puts on the tam at his desk and walks to center of stage.)

Now, as College president and professor at the University in Wittenberg, Germany, Luther began to criticize the corruption that he saw in the church.

- Luther:** (*Walks over to his desk and slams his fist on his desk*) The sale of forgiveness of sins by indulgences makes me angry!
- Narrator:** Indulgences were certificates from the Pope, which, it was claimed, released a person from his sins. Indulgences wiped away sins without the need to repent. A monk named John Tetzel traveled about Germany selling these indulgences.
- John Tetzel:** (*Strolls on stage holding some indulgences and the money box coffer, followed by the **Peasant man** and **Peasant woman** who have some coins, and they all stand center stage*) Buy your indulgences right now! If you do, you will be released from your sins! These indulgences are also good for your relatives who have died. Buy an indulgence for them, and they will be released from purgatory and go to heaven!
- Peasant man:** I'll buy one! I need to be forgiven of my sins and not feel guilty.
- Peasant woman:** I need one for my mother who died last year.
- John Tetzel:** (*Holds out the money box and hands each **Peasant** an indulgence as the **Peasants** drop their coins into the coffer.*) Thank you, you are now released from all your sins!
(*Tetzel says in a sing-song poetic tone:*)
When in the coffer a coin doth ring,
A soul from purgatory springs!
Oh, when in the coffer a coin doth ring,
A soul from purgatory springs!!
Your dear mother is now leaving purgatory to go to heaven!
- Luther:** I am ready to challenge this nonsense! (*Picks up the 95 Theses scroll and a hammer from the basket by the chair and begins to walk over to the Wittenburg Church door to "nail" up the Theses.*)
- Narrator:** So on October 31, 1517, Luther went to the castle church at Wittenburg where he had been a priest. He nailed to the door a document he wrote containing 95 statements, which challenged the church's false teachings on indulgences. Let's listen as Martin Luther reads eight of the 95 Theses from the Wittenburg Church door:
- Luther:** Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following truths will be discussed at Wittenberg, under the presidency of the Reverend Father Martin Luther. He requests that you debate with him, either in person or by letter.
1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, wants believers to repent of their sins every day.
 21. The preachers of indulgences are wrong, who say that by buying an indulgence you are free from your sins, and saved.
 27. It is not true that as soon as a penny jingles in the moneybox a soul flies out of purgatory and goes to heaven.
 36. Every Christian who truly repents of his sins is free of the penalty of sin and of guilt.
 45. God is angry with any Christian who uses his money to buy indulgences rather than help someone who is in need.

52. It is vain to believe that you get salvation by buying an indulgence.

86. Why doesn't the Pope, who is very rich, build the church of St. Peter with his own money, instead of trying to get the money from poor believers?

94. Christians need to be diligent to follow Christ, their Head, no matter what the cost.

Narrator: When Martin Luther nailed these 95 Theses to the church door, he began what we now call the Protestant Reformation.

(Pause)

Luther had many other concerns about the teachings of the church. The church did not allow anyone to own or read the Bible. The Bible was only available in Latin. Luther was very concerned that the common people should be able to read the Bible in the language that they could understand.

(Peasants walk over to kneeling bench and kneel down as if in church.)

In church, Latin was spoken . . .

Church Official 1: *(Walks over to the kneeling bench to conduct services and says in a slow and solemn voice)* In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram.

Peasant man: What did he say?

Peasant woman: I don't know! I can't understand one word! I'm not educated in Latin! I guess I just have to trust the priest to tell me what to believe.

Narrator: Luther decided to do something about the common people not being able to understand when the church Bible was read aloud.

Luther: I will translate the Bible into German, the native language of my people!

Narrator: Later, by 1522, Martin Luther completed the translation of the first German New Testament of the Bible.

(Luther walks over to the Peasants and presents each with a German New Testament.)

Peasant man: I can read and understand this Bible now. It is in German instead of Latin!

Peasant woman: Now I can learn what the Word of God says and not depend upon priests or church officials to tell me what it means!

Narrator: Luther learned many new Biblical truths, and taught them to the people.

Luther: The Bible is God's message to His people and is totally true. Every person should be able to read the Bible in his own language. If there is a difference between what the Bible teaches and the tradition of the Church, we must follow the Bible. All believers are priests. We do not need a priest to pray for us since we can pray directly to God ourselves, through Jesus, and He hears us.

Narrator: The church officials did not agree with what Luther was teaching.

Church Official 1: Martin Luther, you are wrong!

Church Official 2: Be quiet! Stop teaching these things.

Narrator: But Luther did not stop teaching the truth. The church officials became even angrier.

Church Official 1: Luther, you are a heretic! You are preaching lies!

Church Official 2: You must recant; you must admit that you are wrong!

(Luther walks over to his desk and sits down.)

Narrator: Martin Luther did not stop preaching, teaching, and writing books for the German people. Pope Leo X ordered that his books be burned.

Church Official 1: *(Grabs books from desk, throws them on the floor, and shouts)* Burn these evil books!

*(Luther walks over to the center podium and faces the audience as the **Narrator** speaks.)*

Narrator: Luther was put on trial before Charles V, Emperor of the Roman Empire. Luther traveled to the city of Worms (pronounced “verms”) in Germany. At his trial he was ordered to recant—to say what he had written and what he was teaching were all lies.

Church Official 2: *(Loudly)* You are dividing the church. You must stop this heretical preaching and writing!

Luther: *(Stands at center stage and slowly and forcefully answers with these most famous words)*
Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not take back anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.

Narrator: Martin Luther did not win his trial. He was declared a heretic and an outlaw. No subject of the emperor was to give him a place to sleep, or food or drink. Yet God protected him through his friends, and he worked for God for 25 more years. And thus began the Protestant Reformation which would set the world on fire for Christ.

Narrator: In conclusion, Luther also made great contributions to music, and had these things to say about it:

Luther: If any man despises music, as all fanatics do, for him I have no liking; for music is a gift of God, not an invention of man.
I would allow no man to preach or teach God’s people without a proper knowledge of the use and power of sacred song.

Narrator: One of the results of the Reformation was the restoration of congregational singing. The song that we are about to sing is based upon Psalm 46, which begins, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble.” It became the battle cry of the people, and a source of strength for many who were martyred for their faith. It has been translated from

German into almost every known language. The first line of this hymn, “A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing”, is inscribed on Luther’s tomb.

Let’s honor Martin Luther by singing Luther’s most famous hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”.

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

1. *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 power are great,
and armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.*
2. *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. *And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
his truth to triumph through us.
The Prince of Darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo, his doom is sure;
One little word shall fell him.*
4. *That word above all earthly powers-
no thanks to them abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
through Him with whom we sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God’s truth abideth still
His kingdom is forever!*

Sources

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