

The Story of God's Mighty Acts 2nd Millennium

The lamp of God's truth burned dimly in the early part of the second millennium. At times its flame seemed to go out, but gradually and despite strong opposition, its light increased until in the sixteenth century the full light of the Protestant Reformation overcame the darkness of medieval Romanism. That light continued to spread so that by the end of the millennium its flame had reached the farthest corners of the globe.

Darkness before Dawn

With the papacy in mind, the Roman Catholic historian Lord Acton observed that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The popes of the early centuries of the second millennium certainly proved his dictum. Many of them were notorious for their greed and immorality. Yet Innocent III (1198–1216) declared that no king had the right to rule unless he served the papacy with reverence and full submission! Corrupt popes presided over a corrupt clergy and a corrupt church. Bishops and priests were often utterly ignorant of Scripture and mumbled their way through the religious services in Latin, which the common people could not understand. Upon such untaught people they imposed superstitious dogmas such as transubstantiation, purgatory, indulgences, prayers for the dead, and the



Martin Luther Discovering Justification by Faith by Edward Matthew Ward
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adoration of Mary and the saints. Hardly anyone knew what true Christianity was.

But during this period some beams of gospel light shone through. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Waldensians of the Alpine regions of France and Italy displayed astounding missionary zeal and indomitable courage in taking the gospel to many European countries in the teeth of merciless Roman Catholic persecution.

During the fourteenth century Wycliffe, “The Morning Star of the Reformation,” gave the English people the Scriptures in their own language. His followers, the Lollards, were tortured and burned for distributing his translation, but they persisted, and copies found their way even to mainland Europe.

John Hus was born around 1369 in Bohemia. While at the University of Prague he studied the writings of Wycliffe and later became Preacher in the University Chapel. There he incurred the wrath of the church for teaching that the Bible alone was the source of truth. He was slain by order of the Council of Constance in 1415, despite having received an imperial safe-conduct. His testimony did not die, however, and the Bohemian Brethren remained true to his vision, maintaining a faithful gospel witness as part of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.

Although shafts of light had begun to penetrate, a great blaze of light was needed to dispel the prevailing darkness. The only possible source for such light was the Bible. The historian J. H. Merle d’Aubigné rightly remarked, “The only true reformation is that which emanates from the Word of God.”

After Darkness Light

The Protestant Reformation was a glorious work of God, reviving His church and restoring the gospel to the people of Europe. It began when Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk, grasped the truth of Romans 1:17, “The just shall live by faith,” and rediscovered the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone. Though Luther had already begun to see this vital gospel

truth, he did not grasp just how fully the papal church had repudiated it until in 1517 the pope commissioned John Tetzel to sell indulgences in Germany to raise money for the building of St. Peter’s in Rome. Tetzel shamelessly touted the pope’s indulgences as a sure way of pardon for the sins of the living and the dead. By paying money people could cut their own time in purgatory and secure the release of loved ones already there. Tetzel boasted, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, that moment a soul from purgatory springs.” Luther was incensed by this abuse and on October 31, 1517, he nailed his famous Ninety-five Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg. Though intended as an invitation to scholarly

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May God help me.”**

— Martin Luther

debate, Luther’s theses were soon copied, printed, and distributed all over Germany.

Rome responded slowly at first, not recognizing the seriousness of the German monk’s challenge. The papal machine soon went into top gear, however, as it sought to silence Luther by arguments and threats and finally by placing him under the excommunication of the church and the ban of the empire. The Reformer’s faith was firm. Summoned to appear before the Diet of Worms in 1521 and pressed to recant his opinions, he declared, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. . . . Here I stand. I can do no other. May God help me.”

Luther’s bold stand for the truth created an immense interest in the word of God. Soon a host of other witnesses joined him in spreading the message of the Reformation

across Europe. While Luther was standing for God in Germany, Huldreich Zwingli was witnessing a similar confession in Switzerland. Soon the movement of reform was affecting Holland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Poland, Hungary, France, England, and Scotland.

Men of great faith and learning gave themselves to the work of translating and teaching the word of God. Chief of English translators was William Tyndale, who suffered martyrdom to fulfil his vision of providing a Bible that even the plough boys of England could read. Theologians who grounded their work entirely in the Scriptures played a major role in freeing the common people from the manipulations of papal superstitions. Foremost among Protestant theologians was John Calvin, a Frenchman whose *Institutes of the Christian Religion* were first published when he was twenty-six years old. *The Institutes* more than any other single work strengthened the Protestants of Europe to stand against all the attacks of Rome. To this day it remains the best of all expositions of Reformed truth.

The price of supporting the Reformation was high. All across Europe believers suffered imprisonment and death for their faith. After a promising start in France, the Reformation was subjected to unceasing persecution, culminating in one of the most hideous crimes ever recorded—the carefully planned massacre of about seventy thousand Protestants on St. Bartholomew’s Eve, August 24, 1572.

Scotland and England also had their share of martyrs. The deaths of Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart stirred Scotland and led to the ministry of John Knox, eventually securing Scotland for the Reformed cause. In England, Mary Tudor tried to reverse the Protestantism of her brother, Edward VI, and bring the nation back under papal power. During her brief reign three hundred Protestants suffered martyrdom by burning, including bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley and the

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