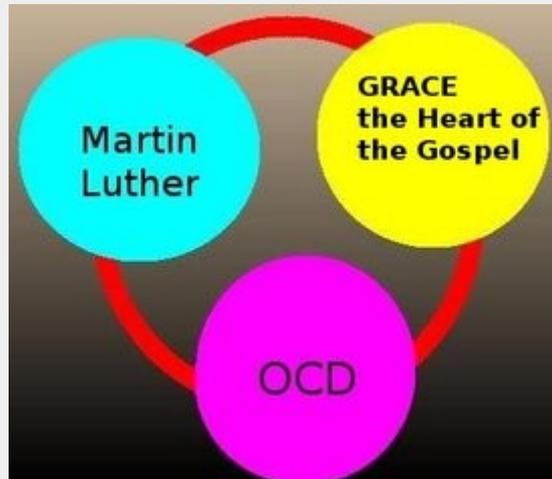


Martin Luther, Grace and OCD



I want to tell you today about 3 things, which link their arms together to present something of the greatest importance to all of us; the third thing in particular is vital for some of us, and useful to all.

These 3 are Martin Luther, Grace, and OCD!

Sub-title - How Martin Luther's mental illness drove him to rediscover the heart of the Gospel and rescue Christianity from its deadly sleep.

1. Martin Luther (A Story)



1483 to 1546

Martin Luther

No person save Columbus has left such a deep impression on our modern age" - Emerson.

"It is safe to say that every person in Western Europe and in America is another person altogether from what he or she would have been had Martin Luther not lived." - P. Smith. High praise indeed

Christianity is not about who is the greatest on earth, but it is still it a fair to say that there never was a man like the Apostle Paul till Luther appeared in the 15th century.

He was a natural leader, stubborn, brave, brilliant, energetic, doing the work of several normal men. He was not a perfect man - pigheaded at times, hasty in judgment, sometimes unfair, making many mistakes, but remember too that this was at a time when the world was being turned upside-down. He might have seemed at times like a bull in a china shop, but better to think of him as a bulldozer amidst the rubble and ruin of centuries of spiritual decay.

That great time of spiritual re-discovery known as the Reformation began when Luther rediscovered grace, not when he later nailed his protest of 95 Theses to the door of Wittenberg church.

The medieval church had lost the gospel entirely, redefining God's righteousness as only His severe justice against sinners, no matter how small the offence. It was law without mercy, and Christ the King with the crown of thorns was replaced with Christ the King with the sword of judgment.

Luther was born in 1483 in northern Germany, son of a successful copper-miner. He was bright and his parents planned for him to become a lawyer. Yet as a boy he was very sensitive of conscience, fearing he was doomed to hell. While studying law, he was travelling one night when a great thunderstorm came on.



He was thrown to the ground by a nearby lightning strike. In terror, he prayed he would not die, and vowed to join a monastery if he lived. He later said that "Suddenly surrounded by terror and the agony of death, I felt constrained to make my vow." His father was furious,

but 2 weeks later Martin entered the Augustinian monastery and became a monk.

The Augustinian life was very severe as the monks sought to assure their place in heaven through devotion and self-sacrifice. Luther suffered mental agonies here, worrying constantly that he was not good enough.

Agonies **"so great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them, no pen could describe them, and one who has not himself experienced them could not believe them."** He suffered constantly from fierce scruples over the most minor or imagined sins.



The Medieval church's practice of confession to a priest was battleground - Luther would engage a priest for as long as 6 hours "splintering even the smallest sin into chains of minute details", then sometimes asked the priest to start it all over again! Later he said "no confessor wanted anything to do with me". Even Staupitz, his spiritual advisor, and a gentle-hearted man, was so frustrated with Martin that he said "Look here, if you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive - parricide, blasphemy, adultery - instead of all these peccadilloes!"

Whenever he heard the phrase "the righteousness of God" it terrified him -

"struck my conscience like lightning" .. "was like a thunderbolt in my heart".

Romans 1:17 was a mental battleground for Luther: it filled him with hatred for God

"For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed..."

It filled him with hatred for God "I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners ... is it not enough that God crushes us miserable sinners with His law, that He has to threaten us with punishment through the Gospel too?"

He became so desperate he began to lose hope - "I, Martin Luther, would have killed myself if the light of the Gospel had not come."

When forced to study the Bible by the wise insight of his Augustinian superior, Father Staupitz, he came to a breakthrough. Working in the tower of the Black Cloister he came again to that **DREADED VERSE** – Romans 1:17.

At its end Luther read

For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'

But he now saw with new eyes. This was not the active righteousness God demands of us in our works (never, ever, good enough) but the passive righteousness that God freely gives to all who believe the Gospel, that is, the Good News, that there is One, Jesus the son of God, who both lived a perfect life on our behalf, and died a sinless death for us sinners, so that we need not die ourselves.

This is the great exchange, the heart of the Gospel, that Jesus came down to this world, down to the cross, down to the grave, down into Hell, to carry us in His arms to Heaven. Luther wrote that he felt



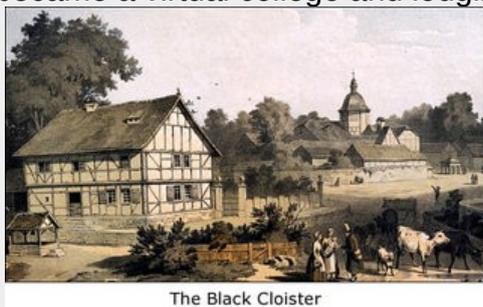
"I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates ... that place in Paul (i.e., Romans 1:17) was for me truly the gate to paradise."

What now the "righteousness of God"? -

"I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word 'righteousness of God'. Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise."

The Glorious Middle Period

In this middle period of his life, the liberated Luther launched the Reformation, preaching and teaching every day, publishing a new work every 2 weeks, marrying and raising a family, while his home, the old "Black Cloister" of the now unused Augustinian monastery, became a virtual college and lodging house for crowds of thinkers and seekers. He often



brought 100 home for dinner, and his good wife Katie, whom he had rescued along with several other nuns from a convent, provided for them all - a great woman, and the delight of Martin's life. She was his great support during his later years, when he suffered many illnesses along with depression.



2. Grace (A Great Truth)

The Righteous Shall Live by Faith

What exactly was it that Luther had to unlearn and re-learn? What did he find in his desperate searching of the Bible?

He had been taught all his life that the "righteousness of God" was God's terrifying anger against every sinful thought, action and word of men. Now of course there is truth in this,

but not the whole truth. Certainly God is opposed to all sin, all that is destructive of the good universe He made, all that is opposite to the goodness of His own nature. He must act to correct this. That is true.

What the medieval church had lost sight of was that God has indeed already done something about it. They allowed themselves to go back to self-righteousness, thinking the good news to be "too good to be true". Man by himself always relapses back to self-righteousness when faced with his own sin and God's great holiness and power. Pride says "I can make myself good enough somehow". Foolishness believes it! Pride thinks "I am good at heart, with just a few rough edges". Foolishness believes it! It takes a desperate man to attempt the experiment.

Luther was that desperate man.

The written word of God, the Bible, had effectively been side-lined. Lip-service was paid to the Bible, but few ever read it, or even saw it. At age 28 Martin Luther was assigned, unwillingly, as a lecturer on the Bible at a local university. Unwilling because he did not want to face the verses that terrified him. But he must obey - at 32 years old he comes to Romans, and the grim verse 1:17. To his amazement he now sees that it says something very different from what he thought.

17 For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed - a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

- the Gospel shows God's righteousness
- what's more, it is by faith, first to last
- it is received then by faith in God and His promise (through Christ)
- so it is not, and cannot be, by any works we do. No, nothing!

It is vital not to lose sight of the simplicity of this truth. It is mind-boggling. It cuts to the root of all man's pride. God is so GOOD, that what He does is NOT "too good to be true".

But man cries out "**too cheap!**"



Too Cheap!

"I will not be rescued like a weakling, without cost to myself!" Well then you will never be rescued, for there is no other way.



A story was told about a man who got permission to go underground to talk to the coal-miners. On the way back out the foreman said to him "what you say is all very well, but its too cheap!". Seeming to ignore the comment the man asked "how much do we have to pay to use this lift out of the pit?". "Pay! why nothing" said the foreman - "the mine-owners built it for our use. We just get in." "And it cost the mine-owners nothing?" The foreman, surprised, replied "It cost a huge amount." "Just so" the man answered " and will you say of God, who gave His own Son to die, that we might come up free from the pit of hell, 'Too Cheap!'".

This glorious, free, for-no-cost, salvation is told to us again and again in the Bible.

- **Isaiah 55:1** "Come, everyone who thirsts. come to the waters, and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk **without money and without price.**"
- **Matthew 11:28** "Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"
- **John 6:37** "All that the Father gives to Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will never drive away."
- **Romans 5:1** "Therefore, **since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God** through our Lord Jesus Christ."
- **Galatians 3:13** "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us"
- **Ephesians 2:8-9** "For by grace you have been saved through faith. **And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works**, so that no one may boast."
- **Revelation 22:17** "The Spirit and the Bride say 'Come" And let the one who hears say 'Come". And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires **take the water of life without price.**"

In C.S. Lewis's book "The Silver Chair" Jill and Eustace are sent to the world of Narnia. They are in a great forest, and as they wander they come to the edge of a great cliff. Jill is showing off by standing right on the edge, but looking down she gets wobbly – Eustace tries to pull her back but she struggles and he falls over. She flops and the ground and cries her eyes out. But you can't cry forever, and she is thirsty so goes looking for water. At last she hears the tinkling of a stream, but is terrified when she sees a huge golden lion on her side of the stream.

'Are you not thirsty?' said the Lion. 'I'm dying of thirst,' said Jill. 'Then drink,' said the Lion. 'May I - could I - would you mind going away while I do?' said Jill. The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl.... 'I daren't come and drink,' said Jill. 'Then you will die of thirst,' said the Lion. 'Oh dear!' said Jill, coming another step nearer. 'I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.' **'There is no other stream,' said the Lion.**" CS Lewis, The Silver Chair, ch. 2

There is no other stream of the water of life except God's blessed GRACE

3. OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder – A Reality)

It is a REALITY that some Christians don't accept, that Christians can suffer from any mental illness. Let me assure you we can! I have known Christians who have suffered with mental illness, and I know one very intimately: MYSELF.

A lot of breakthrough research has been done in the last few decades on what was thought to be an obscure mental disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. It is now well understood, and affects between 1% and 3% of adults, usually beginning early in life. Thank God, is successfully treatable.

Looking back at Luther's life and early struggles, it is pretty clear now that he suffered from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (or OCD). It is a mental illness brought on by a genetic bias affecting the brain chemistry, often triggered by cultural and religious factors, or a severe streptococcal throat infection.



Does this mean what Luther discovered is invalid as **"he was just sick in the head!"**? Of course not - is a drowning man's experience of deep water any less valid that an iron-man's? Certainly it is a very different experience, and one that the iron-man can never understand (until he gets a leg cramp 2 km from the beach!).

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is a whole range of disorders, well beyond the popular idea of a person obsessed with dirt and compelled to wash their hands 30 times, or obsessed that the stove is still on when they have already checked it 30 times.

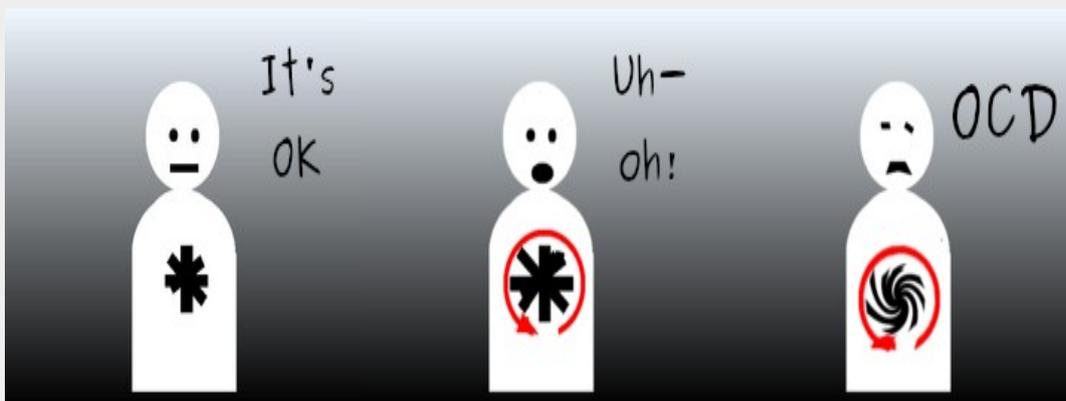
It has been called "the doubting disease" and a chronic fear of your own thoughts.

The **obsession** is and unwanted thought, usually something that the sufferer fears most, and cannot stop thinking about. It seems an over-quick cycle of fear and "what-if" analysis runs around in the brain, like a squirrel-cage with no exit. The **compulsion** is some action that the mind insists you do to stop the thought



For people with religious belief it very often comes out as what is called "scrupulosity", where the conscience becomes over active, poring over the most minute or imagined imperfections of actions, thoughts and character.

A man once described conscience as "a spiky thing in his heart, that turns around when he does something wrong, and hurts badly".



It's OK- Uh-Oh! OCD

For the OCD sufferer, **the spiky thing spins like a dentist's drill and starts at the most tiny or imagined wrong. It blades are as sharp as knives, and they never go blunt!** (without treatment)

- A person **without** OCD, when convinced of some wrong, correctly **makes a mountain out of a mountain.**
- A person **with** OCD makes **mountains out of molehills** (eg, anguished apologies where the recipient never saw any offence. It can include a compulsion to confess even a fleeting thought, never entertained seriously - "ah, but did I hesitate for a second before rejecting this thought?". "Oh no! - I've stepped on a twig on my neighbour's lawn and broken it - I'll have to find him and apologise." "Don't be a fool!" says the rational part of the brain, but it does no good - weeks can be spent in torment over it.)
- and the person with OCD can even **make mountains out of valleys** (eg, saying something in a joking manner to a friend, then worrying they have taken you literally and been offended). In the area of an obsession, the sufferer cannot trust their own thinking.

- "if it seems the most important issue in the Universe, it's OCD"
- **even prayer** can become an obsession - in fact, it often does - "Oh no! - I forget to say so-and-so's name when I was praying," "I wasn't passionate enough in my prayer" The matching compulsion would be "I'll have to start all over again!"
- **even telling others** about the Gospel can be an obsession. "What, isn't that what Christians are supposed to do?". Yes, out of delight in God's free mercy, and from a genuine interest in the other person; not when driven by self-absorbed guilt. That is not the way God works. That is not the Spirit's way of leading.
- thank God, not all with OCD go through the depths that Luther did. Many have it to a lesser degree, suffer in silence, and no one else suspects the storms that rage inside.

Do you think I am exaggerating? I assure you I am not. I've been through most of these examples, and some more beside, and it is torment – hell-ish!

John Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress" 200 years later – a desperate man with great burden on his back that he cannot get rid of, running he knows not where, to get rid of it. A picture of Luther as a young man. No surprise that Bunyan also suffered with OCD (especially if you have read his autobiography "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners"). It was his discovery of Luther's (by then old) commentary on Galatians that brought him to freedom in Christ. Bunyan wrote "**Run John, run, the Law commands, but gives me neither feet nor hands. Far better news the Gospel brings; it bids me fly, and gives me wings!**"



What Help is There?

OCD is a complex disease, often overlapping with depression. From my experience (as an OCD sufferer) it is a job for a sympathetic psychiatrist (probably a simplification, but a psychiatrist is a psychologist who is also a medical specialist, and can prescribe medications).

Do not be put off by any stigma about seeing a psychiatrist. You would not refuse to see a skilled doctor you had a broken leg - why worry when it is a disordered brain.

The story is told of a man on a rooftop with the flood waters rising rapidly. He prays vigorously for God to save him. Some men come along in a boat "Get in!" they cry, but he answers "No, I am trusting God to rescue me". Two other boats come, and he says the same. After drowning he goes to heaven, and seeing God, says "Why didn't you rescue me?". God replies "I came three times in a boat!"

God uses means: none of us, I hope, expects breakfast to just fall from the sky on to your table.

- **anti-depressive medication** is very helpful, but needs a higher dosage, and for longer, than for straight mood depression. It seems to allow the mind to slow down and think more clearly.
- **just having a diagnosis is enormously helpful** - it allows you to say "ah - this thought is part of my illness, and I'm not alone."
- **learn to tolerate the intrusive thoughts** - trying to repel them just makes them stronger - ignoring them gets easier with time.
- **don't over-analyse your thoughts**; think it through twice at most, and then label it with "this is my illness" and find a healthy distraction.
- **don't respond to any compulsion** that your mind conjures up as a cure. It only gives temporary relief. Yes, your anxiety will spike up, but persist in resisting and it will get less over time.
- **don't keep asking others** for re-assurance ("is this OK?") - it becomes a compulsion and only gives temporary relief.

If you recognise **your own face** here, please seek help.

If you **THINK** you recognise someone else's face, do your best to encourage them quietly, without intruding, and pray for them, and remember it might be you one day!

Tying it all together

Dr Ian Osborn, a Christian and a psychiatrist, and who has OCD, has written a wonderful book called "Can Christianity Cure Obsessive Compulsive Disorder?". His study of Luther, Bunyan and Therese of Lisieux along with his experience of treating those with OCD leads him to a qualified "yes". There is no cure this side of heaven, but it can be effectively treated and managed, and Christianity's core, that we can and should cast our anxieties and responsibilities on to God's willing shoulders is of enormous and eternal benefit. He calls this "**the Therapy of Trust**".

In the end of the book he discusses "**How OCD Saved Christianity.**" No doubt an attention getting title. But what would have happened if troubled, brilliant, energetic Luther had not appeared on the scene? We cannot of course say, but it is plain that God in His Kingly way brought tremendous good out of Luther's awful condition, using him to light the fuse of the Reformation, the re-discovery of the Gospel of God's Free Grace in Jesus.

God chose to use a man desperate to find peace, who could not rest content with a shambles of self-effort. A man desperate to find GRACE. "**God's Riches At Christ's Expense**"

If you know you are a sinner (and **100%** of us suffer with **THIS** malady) then be as desperate as Luther, and learn from him. If you are one of the **3%** few with his illness, take heart, get help, and remember that God is well able to bring gold out of your dross, and light out of your darkness.

Steve Bates, 2026