

# The Reformation at 500: Luther's Stay at the Wartburg (Part 2)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

Those who love holding a Bible in their hands—which they can read in their own language—should be aware of and grateful for the monumental importance of Dr. Martin Luther's 10-month stay at the Wartburg Castle in 1521 and 1522.

It was during this time that Luther first translated the New Testament into German—in just 11 weeks! In so doing, he literally began the modern era of Bible translation.

In the providence of God, Luther was used to launch the Reformation in the wake of two events of inestimable significance. The first was Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, with movable type, in 1450, in Mainz, Germany. The second was the work of a courageous Dutch priest, Desiderius Erasmus, who first published the *Novum Instrumentum* in 1516, in Basel, Switzerland.

Erasmus compiled the Greek text of the New Testament, using the limited resources available to him, and also provided an original translation of the New Testament into Latin.

We know that Luther probed Erasmus' text enthusiastically, and had access to it inside the Wartburg.

Erwin Lutzer states of Luther's time there:

It was here in isolation that Luther had one of the most productive periods of his life. Amid his doubts, depression, confusion, and insomnia, he feverishly wrote books and pamphlets, and most astoundingly of all, translated the New Testament into German in just eleven weeks.<sup>i</sup>

Lewis Spitz comments:

... the great achievement of his enforced "idleness" was his masterful translation of the Greek New Testament into German, which he accomplished from December to the end of February 1522. ... It was a linguistic triumph important ... for its influence on translations of the Bible into other vernacular languages, including English.<sup>ii</sup>

Indeed, one famous student that Luther would personally tutor later on would be none other than William Tyndale. What I would not give to have a recording, or transcription, of those conversations!

It is almost impossible to comprehend how Luther, in the face of innumerable obstacles, could have performed such a feat as translating the New Testament. What a debt of honor we owe him for it—and what an amazing story it makes!

Luther's act of translating from the original Greek was groundbreaking, but it was the target language that gave him as much trouble as anything. A placard at the Lutherhaus in Eisenach, Germany, reads, in part:

Luther did not translate the Bible into German. After all, there was no "German", no standard German language, in those days. Consequently, Luther employed the language of the chancellery of Saxony. His translation was so successful that his biblical language spread widely, even to places where other dialects were spoken. The Luther Bible was thus instrumental in the development of standard written German.<sup>iii</sup>

Luther wanted his Bible to communicate to the people to whom he ministered, including "the mother at home" and "the common man at the market."<sup>iv</sup>

As another placard in Eisenach states:

He invented new words and figures of speech, gave the vernacular a new value and a new tone. Whoever speaks German, sings German or writes German is using the language of Luther and the Bible – even if they are entirely unaware of that.<sup>v</sup>

Luther's work would be published as the *September Testament* on Sept. 21, 1522.<sup>vi</sup>

While this project would have been impressive enough, Lutzer states: "During these ten months he wrote about a dozen books."<sup>vii</sup>

According to Spitz,

He wrote a number of treatises, the most important of which was *On Monastic Vows*, dedicated to his father, in which he argued that celibacy and monastic asceticism were contrary to Scriptures and contributed less to God and man than a useful life in society.<sup>viii</sup>

From his modest room inside the Wartburg, Luther—in hiding and in disguise—made a mark on Western Civilization that will never be erased. The foundation was now in place for a Reformation of enduring consequence.

*Paul J. Scharf (M.A., M.Div., Faith Baptist Theological Seminary) is a church ministries representative for The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, based in Columbus, WI, and serving in the Midwest. For more information on his ministry, visit [sermonaudio.com/pscharf](http://sermonaudio.com/pscharf) or [foi.org/scharf](http://foi.org/scharf), or email [pscharf@foi.org](mailto:pscharf@foi.org).*

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<sup>i</sup> Erwin W. Lutzer, *Rescuing the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), p. 84.

<sup>ii</sup> Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*, Vol. II, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987), p. 340.

<sup>iii</sup> "In Good German;" visited Sept. 24, 2017.

<sup>iv</sup> Untitled placard at the Lutherhaus in Eisenach, Germany; visited Sept. 24, 2017.

<sup>v</sup> "Luther Lives!"; placard at the Lutherhaus in Eisenach, Germany; visited Sept. 24, 2017.

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<sup>vi</sup> “Luther’s German New Testament;” Concordia University Texas; Sept. 20, 2019;  
<https://www.concordia.edu/blog/archive2019/luther-german-new-testament.html>; Internet; accessed 28 April  
2022.

<sup>vii</sup> Lutzer, p. 88.

<sup>viii</sup> p. 340.