family background: All of his life Martin Luther boasted "I am a peasant's son." The ancestral home of the Luthers was the small village of Mehlra on the western slope of the Thuringian forest. The grandfather owned considerable property and the family lived in relatively comfortable circumstances for peasants of that day. Luther's mother was Margareta Ziegler from an ancient and honorable family of Eisenach. Hans and Margareta moved to Eisleben, about eighty miles northeast of Mehlra, where Martin was born, November 10, 1483. By trade Hans was a copper miner. When Martin was six months old his parents moved to Mansfeld. Hans was a thrifty, hardworking, practical man of ambition. From a workman he rose to joint proprietorship in the mines and furnaces. He became one of the leading citizens of Mansfeld, comfortably wealthy and a member of the town council. Lucas Cranach, the artist of the Reformation, has left us portraits of Luther's parents. The parents were earnest and devoutly religious, very strict in religion and in discipline. Their world was one of demons, saints and angels. They loved their children and were ambitious for them. They were determined that Martin should have the best education available. They took great pride in his progress and development and were devoted to him all their lives. Luther had a deep love for his parents though he later complained that they had been unnecessarily harsh in their punishments.

LUTHER'S SCHOOL YEARS: At the age of seven, Martin was enrolled in the school at Mansfeld conducted by a clumsy, bungling, blustering schoolmaster. Luther learned reading, writing, arithmetic, Latin, and had some elementary religious instruction—he remembered especially instruction in the Psalter and the hymn book. Luther remembered that this teacher beat him as many as fifteen times in a single morning.

In 1497, at the age of fourteen, his family sent him to a school conducted by the Brethren of the Common Life in Magdeburg, about forty miles from his home. Though he stayed in this school only a year, he began to show promise as a student. He was impressed with the spiritual life of his teachers. One of his comrades was Wenceslaus Link who would later be a co-laborer in the Reformation. Because of his family's poor circumstances Luther sang for alms at the windows of the wealthier citizens.

The following year (1498) his parents transferred Martin to the Cathedral School at Eisenach, the home of his mother's relatives. He still had to sing for his support, until he was invited into the home of the widow of a prosperous merchant, Ursula Cotta, from the leading family of Schalbe. Luther later confessed that if he had acquired anything of culture and fine manners he had learned them from the gracious Ursula Cotta. During his four years in Eisenach his favorite teacher was John Trebonius who uncovered his head in the presence of his students out of respect to the dignitaries they would become. Luther made rapid progress in grammar and the Classics. He came under the influence of the Franciscans and formed a lasting friendship with the Eisenach priest, Johann Braun, who continued to correspond with Luther even after he broke with the church.

LUTHER AT THE UNIVERSITY: Luther enrolled in the University of Erfurt in the summer semester of 1501. At the time Erfurt was the greatest of the German universities. It had been founded in 1392 and had an
enrollment of over 2,000 students. Luther's father was very proud of his son's abilities and urged him to become a lawyer. The father had prospered financially and was able to pay his tuition in advance.

Luther devoted himself diligently to the liberal studies which included philosophy, classical literature, physical science and astronomy. Philosophy included rhetoric, logic, metaphysics. Luther's favorite professors were Godocus Truettvetter of Eisenach and Bartholomew Arnoldi of Uasingen, both representatives of the later Scholasticism or Nominalism. Luther studied the writings of William Occam, Peter D'Ailly, John Gerson, and Gabriel Biel. The Nominalists were also called Terminists. They denied the reality of general ideas, affirming that they exist only as creations of the mind, and that reality can only be known in the concrete and particular individuals. They attacked Thomism and Aristotle. In the Classics Luther's favorite was Cicero. He also read Ovid, Vergil, Livy, Strabo, Plautus, and Terence.

Luther became so distinguished as a student that his talents were the admiration of the University. He took great pride and joy in the academic ceremonies and general life of the university. He enjoyed an intimate circle of friends, was sociable and even boisterous. They named him "Musicus" because of his fondness for singing and his skill in playing the lyre. John Lange, one of his comrades, would be a lifelong friend. One friend later reported that Luther began every day with prayer and that his motto was "To pray well is to study well." He expressed great delight on finding a complete Latin Bible in the library—he had known only the Missal and Breviary. He completed the Bachelor of Arts in September 1502. He received the Master of Arts at Epiphany, 1505, having completed both degrees in minimum time.

Out of deference to his father's wishes Luther began the study of law. At considerable expense to his father he purchased the necessary books and paid the tuition. Luther did not like the study of law, yet he felt that it was his duty to follow his parents' wishes. He was beginning to be troubled over the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of his soul. His parents were casting about for a suitable marriage prospect. Luther was deeply shaken by the sudden death of a close friend. Caught in a terrible lightning storm in the forest on his way home for the summer vacation in 1505 he cried to one of the patron saints of his childhood and the protectress of Saxon miners, "Help me, dear St. Anna, I will become a monk!"

Two weeks later, on July 16, 1505, he invited his intimate friends to an evening of joy and music as his farewell to the world. To the great displeasure of his parents he kept his vow and entered the monastery of the Augustinian Hermits.

LUTHER THE MONK: The Augustinian Order was organized in 1256 and received its name from "The Rule of St. Augustine" compiled from Augustine's teachings on the spiritual life. Andreas Proles had led a reform of the movement in Germany in 1493, aimed at purity of life, deep earnestness, and the development of powerful preachers. The Augustinians had the reputation of being the best of the orders in life and in preaching. John Staupitz, Vicar-General of the congregation in Erfurt, had set as his goal to arrive at a purer teaching of the Gospel.

The cloister was very proud of gaining so brilliant a master of the arts but made no difference between Luther and the other novitiates. The first year was spent in the most rigorous discipline aimed at surpressing all pride and at humble obedience. Luther was busy with sweeping, scrubbing, scouring, begging from door to door, learning how to sit, walk, stand, kneel, hold his hands, direct his eyes, how to eat and drink, and how to conduct himself in the presence of superiors. Much time was spent in worship and prayer. Discipline was most severe for breaking silence in his cell, falling asleep or laughing during services, or speaking to a woman. Weekly confession of sins was most
searching. Luther's associates envied his scholarship and reminded him that it was his duty to beg and not to study so much. Too much study of Scripture might lead to pride.

At the end of the year of novitiate Luther was admitted to full membership in the order. He was the model of holiness. He surpassed all his fellow monks in study, prayer, fasting and discussion. He later declared that if a monk could have gone to heaven by observance of monastic vows, he would have been the one. He permanently undermined his health by his austerities. More and more Luther alternated between times of great joy in the life of the monk and times of deep depression and concern. He was filled with doubts about scholastic philosophy and its relation to Holy Scripture. He was troubled over man's free will and predestination. More and more he was terrified by his thoughts of Christ as the Law-giver, the Father as the angry judge, his own imperfections, and the impossibility of meeting all the requirements for salvation.

Some of his superiors felt that Luther would infect the whole monastery with his doubts and questions. Staupitz tried to convince him that his sins were trivial, that Christ did not terrify but rather consoled, and warned Luther against trusting so much in his own powers rather than in the grace of God. He tried to convince Luther that the true meaning of repentance was love to God and not a succession of acts. He guided Luther to the study of Scripture and the Church Fathers—especially to the study of the devotional classics such as the works of Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Eckhart and Tauler, the Imitation of Christ and the German Theology. He wanted to get Luther so busy studying that he would not have time to worry about his soul.

Martin Luther was ordained to the priesthood in 1507. With considerable pride in his son, the father came on horseback with some twenty friends to the ordination. He provided liberally for the celebration. He still questioned whether Luther's call was from the Lord or whether he had been deluded by a whisper from the devil. Luther faltered in his first mass which distressed him greatly.

LUTHER THE PROFESSOR: Wittenberg, a small city about sixty miles S.S.W. from Berlin, was the residence of the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise. The city had two large churches, the Parochial Church and the Castle Church. It also had an Augustinian Cloister. In the fall of 1502 Frederick the Wise opened the University of Wittenberg in which he took great pride. He enlisted the aid of Staupitz in selecting professors for the university. In the fall of 1508 Staupitz sent seven Augustinians to Wittenberg to be instructors—one of the seven was Martin Luther. Among the professors at Wittenberg he found Trutvetter of Erfurt. Nicholas von Altnsdorf and Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt were members of the faculty of theology. Luther lectured on the philosophy of Aristotle but wrote his Eisnach friend, Braun, that he would gladly exchange philosophy for theology. In the spring of 1509 Luther became a Bachelor of Theology with authority to lecture on Scripture. In the fall of 1509 he returned to Erfurt to study for a doctorate in the Sentences of Peter Lombard. In the fall of 1511 Luther was sent on a mission to Rome on behalf of the Augustinian Order, accompanied by John von Mecheln of the Netherlands. Staupitz wanted to bring all Augustinians into his reformed order but had met stiff opposition in Germany. He wanted Luther to win support for the reform in Rome. He told Luther that if he were fortunate he might get a glimpse of his Holiness, Pope Julius II. Luther travelled on foot from monastery to monastery. At the first sight of Rome he fell down and cried, "Hail, holy Rome!" He visited the ancient ruins but most impressed with the churches, especially St. Peter's. He made an unreserved confession of all his sins that he had ever committed. He tried to worship before every relic hoping to deliver the souls of his parents from purgatory. On his knees he climbed Pilate's stairway, kissing every step. He was moved by the
poverty and ignorance of the poor and the frivo ty and luxury of the priests and the way they hurried through the mass offended him. He was a faithful son of the church and a zealous champion of the pope—it was only later that he spoke of the great evils he had seen in Rome.

On his return to Germany he was sent a second time to Wittenberg. In the fall of 1512 he was made a Doctor of Theology. Dr. Carlstadt presided and conferred the degree. His old schoolmate, Link, as prior of the Wittenberg monastery participated in the service. The Elector heard Luther preach and was so pleased that he provided for the expenses of the degree. At twenty-nine Luther was made pastor of the Castle Church and Doctor of Holy Scriptures in the University.

In 1513 Luther began lectures on the Psalms that were not completed until 1516. The study of the Psalms made it clear that David had a different inreligion from the pope and stood in a close, warm, loving relationship with his God. In 1516 Luther began lecturing on Romans. He found Paul to be the best interpreter of the Psalms. Paul stood in a warm, loving personal relationship to his Lord. Luther under went a great conversion experience called his "Tower Experience." Righteousness comes from faith in Christ and not from works of the law. Luther moved to Galatians with its declaration of freedom from the law. He lectured on Hebrews and the Pastorals. He gained an enthusiastic following among faculty and students.

In the spring of 1515 Luther was appointed vicar of the Augustinians with the oversight of eleven monasteries. He took his appointment with great seriousness.

Luther's fame as vicar, professor and preacher grew. He was scrupulous in observing ecclesiastical requirements. When he found that pressing engagements kept him from observing the canonical hours of prayer, the following Sunday after the service, he would look himself in his cell to make up the number of the missed prayers.

LUTHER AND THE SALE OF INDULGENCES: In 1516 Pope Leo X, having exhausted the treasury of Rome to satisfy his luxurious habits, announced a Jubilee Sale of Indulgences to complete the building of St. Peter's. Three high church offices in Germany were vacant and were put up for sale to the highest bidder. They were the Archbishopric of Mainz, the Archbishopric of Magdeburg, and the bishopric of Halberstadt. Albrecht of Brandenburg was highest bidder. He borrowed the funds from the bankers of Augsburg, the Fuggers. Albrecht hired the Dominican, John Tetzel, of Leipzig, to sell the indulgences; Albrecht, the pope and Fuggers would share the profits. Tetzel proved a master salesman.

Luther was highly offended at the crass commercialism and the extravagant claims of Tetzel. He forbade the sale of indulgences in Wittenberg. When he learned that some of his people were crossing the river to buy from Tetzel he prepared his Ninety-five Theses. On October 30, 1517 he nailed them to the door of the Castle Church.

It was not an act of rebellion; rather it was a call to the academic community to debate the value of indulgences and the true nature of repentance.

Almost over night Luther found himself the hero and leader of those who wanted reform. With the aid of the printing press the Theses were scattered all over Germany. Tetzel and Konrad Wimpina published answers to Luther. John Eck, one of Germany's ablest professors at Ingolstadt, published his Obelissi against Luther. Luther replied in a powerful sermon on "Indulgence and Grace."

When Albrecht and the pope found revenues from the sale of indulgences dropping drastically they called on the Augustinians to silence their monk. At the annual meeting of the Augustinians in Heidelberg in April, 1518, Luther was called on to state his case.