 King Henry VIII

 England was far distant and isolated from the rest of Europe. While Protestantism tore apart European society, it took a far different form in England, retaining much of the doctrine and the practices of Catholicism. England also experienced the greatest wavering between the two religions as the monarchs of England passed from one religion to the next.

England had, for several centuries, an uncomfortable relationship with Rome. Some of the most strident and successful reformers in the Middle Ages were English; the first translation of the Bible from Latin into a vernacular language was made in England.

The adoption of Protestantism, however, was a political rather than a religious move. King Henry VIII had originally married Catherine of Aragon; since she had been previously married to his brother, though, Henry had to get special papal permission for the marriage. Marrying the wife of one’s brother was incest; it was almost equivalent to marrying one’s sister. The marriage, however, produced no male children to occupy the throne at Henry’s death. Henry began to doubt both of the marriage and the spiritual validity of the marriage. In the mid-1520’s, he met and fell in love with Ann Boleyn, a lady in waiting to Catherine. He wished to annul his marriage to Catherine and marry Ann; not only did he love Ann, he feared leaving the throne of England without a male heir.

In order to marry Ann, the marriage with Catherine had to be annulled by the pope. Circumstances, however, were working against him. First, in order to marry Catherine, he needed special papal permission. Annulling the marriage would imply that the first papal permission was an error, something the pope was not willing to admit. Second, Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, had recently invaded Rome and captured the pope. While the pope was allowed to stay pope, he was the virtual prisoner of Charles. The answer to Henry’s request then was no and no again.

When he met with failure, Henry did what every other king would do. He fired his closet advisor. This was an important move. His closest advisor on the matter was Cardinal Wolsey, the lord chancellor of England. The negotiations with the papal court were largely carried out by Wolsey. When he failed, Henry dismissed and arrested him and replaced him with Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell. Both these men were sympathetic to the new ideas of Martin Luther. They gave the king some radical advice: if the pope does not grant the annulment, then split the English church off from the Roman church. Rather than the pope, the king would be the spiritual head of the English church. If the king wants an annulment, then the king can grant his own annulment. After much debate within English Parliament, powers over the church clergy were finally granted to the king.

Despite this entire storm of activity, the English church didn’t really change. The average person going to church would see almost no change in the practices or dogma of the church. It was still for all practical purposes a Catholic Church; the only real difference that anybody would notice was the use of English Bibles in the church. The only substantive change Henry made merely involved the *head* of the church. The English church however would radically change under Henry’s successor, Edward VI.

 Elizabeth I

 Elizabeth's life was troubled from the moment she was born. Henry VIII changed the course of his country's history in order to marry Ann Boleyn, hoping that she would bear him the strong and healthy son that Catherine of Aragon never did. But, on September 7, 1533 in Greenwich Palace, Ann bore Elizabeth instead.

Ann did eventually conceive a son, but he was stillborn. By that point, Henry had begun to grow tired of Anne and began to orchestrate her downfall. Most, if not all, historians agree that Henry’s charges of incest and adultery against Ann were false, but they were all he needed to sign her execution warrant. She was beheaded on the Tower Green on May 19, 1536, before Elizabeth was even three years old.

Elizabeth was sent away from court, as she was a reminder to Henry of Ann. Henry had remarried and was eagerly awaiting the song he hoped Jane Seymour was carrying. As it turned out, she was indeed to bear Henry a son, Edward VI. Jane died shortly after her son was born.

Elizabeth’s last stepmother was Katherine Parr, the sixth queen to Henry VIII. Katherine had hoped to marry Thomas Seymour (brother to the late Queen Jane), but she caught Henry’s eye. She brought both Elizabeth and her half-sister Mary back to court. When Henry died, she became the Queen and took her household from Court. Because of the young age of Edward VI, Edward Seymour (another brother of Jane’s and therefore the young king’s uncle) became Lord Protector of England.

Edward VI may have contracted what was then called consumption (possibly tuberculosis) or had a severe respiratory infection. When it looked inevitable that the teenager would die without an heir of his own body, the plots for his crown began. Since Elizabeth was a daughter of the late King Henry VIII, she was in line to the throne (despite several attempts to remove her from the chain, she was in Henry’s will as an heir) and was therefore a most sought-after bride. Edward VI died in 1553.

Mary daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon (first wife) was the rightful heir to the throne. Shortly after becoming Queen, Mary was wed to Prince Phillip of Spain, which made the Catholic Queen quite unpopular. The persecuted Protestants saw Elizabeth as their savior, since she was seen as an icon of “the new faith”. After all, it was to marry her mother Ann Boleyn that Henry instituted the break with Rome. Because of this, several rebellions and uprisings were made in Elizabeth’s name, although she herself probably had little or no knowledge of them. However, Mary sensed the danger from her younger sister, and imprisoned her in the Tower.

When it appeared that Mary had become pregnant, Elizabeth was no longer seen as a significant threat and the Queen let her return to her residence at Hatfield, under semi-house arrest. Mary Tudor was nearly 40 years old when the news of her “pregnancy” came. After a few months, her belly began to swell, but no baby was ever forthcoming. Some modern historians think that she had a large ovarian cyst, and this is also what lead to her failing health and eventual death.

News of Mary’s death on November 17, 1558 reached Elizabeth at Hatfield, where she was said to be out in the park, sitting under an oak tree. Upon hearing that she was Queen, legend has it that Elizabeth quoted the 118th Psalm’s twenty-third line, in Latin: “*A Dominum factum est illud, et est mirabile in oculis notris”*- “It is the lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” Elizabeth had survived and was finally Queen of England.