

Psalm 6: Consolation Hidden in its Opposite: Profoundly Terrified but Profoundly Comforted

As early as 1517, Luther published the first edition of *The Seven Penitential Psalms*. Although the exposition was “good enough” at the time when nothing better existed, he later revised the work in 1525.¹ In the church, these Psalms were used after the hour of Lauds on Lenten Fridays, primarily as an expression of Christian repentance, despite Luther’s break with the penitential system of the medieval church.² While

1. See “Preface,” in LW 14.140.

2. See Introduction to LW 14, ix. See also Mark A. Throntveit, “The Penitential Psalms and Lenten Discipline,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 1 (Winter 1987): 503.

retaining the element of repentance, Luther discerned the element of lamentation in some of these Psalms.

The analysis of Psalm 6, the first of the penitential Psalms, will be based primarily on his improved edition, with occasional reference to his earlier work. When expounding this Psalm, Luther dwelt on the prophet's complaint over his sorrowful plight rather than his sin and repentance, underscoring his desperate need for divine comfort. Far from rejecting lamentation as an unwitting sin of blasphemy or suppressing it as an irrational act,³ Luther asserted that the whole of the believer's life is lamentation, genuine and godly. Commenting on verse 8, "For the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping," he wrote: "God is so disposed that He gladly hears those who cry and lament, but not those who feel smug and independent. Therefore the good life does not consist in outward works and appearances but in a lamenting and sorrowful spirit."⁴ He sought support for this in the fourth of the penitential Psalms, Psalm 51: "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise" (51:17). "Therefore weeping is preferred to working," Luther concluded, "and suffering exceeds all doing."⁵

Luther's theology allows a discourse with God in which both praise and lamentation find their rightful place. Whilst one finds "finer words of joy... in the psalms of praise,"

3. See Hughes, *Lament, Death and Destiny*, 113–14, where he argued that Luther disdained lament, considering it not only negative but actually blasphemous.

4. LW 14.145 (WA 18.484).

5. LW 14.145 (WA 18.484).

Luther wrote in his *Preface to the Psalter*, one finds “deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness... in the psalms of lamentation.”⁶ As divine language, both praise and lamentation genuinely reveal the “very hearts and the inmost treasure” of the faithful.⁷ Just as praise is the language of joy, so lamentation is the language of suffering and the language of faith, of the confidence that God continues to be God despite the contrary appearances, *sub contrario*.⁸ As a fitting category of suffering, lamentation thus rightly belongs to what Luther called “theology of the cross” (*theologia crucis*), a phrase he announced in thesis 21 of his *Heidelberg Disputation* in 1518.⁹ The cross of Christ and the cross of the Christian, for him, are distinguished, but not separated. Loewenich wrote:

The meaning of the cross does not disclose itself in contemplative thought but only in suffering experience. The theologian of the cross does not confront the cross of Christ as a spectator, but is himself drawn into the event. He knows that God can be found only in cross and suffering.... For God himself is “hidden in suffering” and wants us to worship him

6. LW 35.255ff (WA DB 10.1.103ff) as cited in Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 21.

7. LW 35.255 (WA BR 10.1.103ff).

8. I am indebted to Westermann, “The Role of Lament in the Theology of Old Testament,” 27: “Just as lamentation is the language of suffering, so the praise of God is the language of joy. One is as much a part of man’s being as the other. But it is an illusion to suppose or to postulate that there could be a relationship with God in which there were only praise and never lamentation. Just as joy and sorrow in alternation are a part of the finitude of human existence (Gen. 2-3), so praise and lamentation are a part of man’s relationship to God. Hence, something is amiss if praise of God has a place in Christian worship but lamentation does not. Praise can retain its authenticity and naturalness only in polarity with lamentation.”

9. LW 31.53; See also *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 43.

as such. ... If we are serious about the idea of God and the concept of faith in the theology of the cross, we are faced with the demand of a life under the cross.¹⁰

Proper Perspective

Luther stressed that to read Psalm 6 properly, we must bear in mind these things: First, in all trials and afflictions, we must hurry to God. Far from shying away from such experiences, we should accept that they are sent by God and are not without purpose. Suffering, though not soteriologically efficacious, might foster in us patience and a true fear of God. Those who run away from God and look for relief from creaturely beings become “impatient and a despiser of God.”¹¹ Second, we must take note of the two ways in which God chastens us. “At times he does so in grace as a kind Father, temporally; at times he does so in wrath as a stern Judge, eternally.”¹² People, by nature weak and fainthearted, and most manifestly so during trials, often fail to discern the correct way in which God seizes them. In verse 1, the psalmist, in fear of his wrath, cries out, “O Lord, rebuke me not in Thy anger, nor chasten me in Thy wrath.” The psalmist was afraid that God might strike him “only in a punitive way,” chastising him “without fruit while there is only wrath.”¹³ Knowing he is a sinner, the psalmist pleads that God might deal with him in mercy and gentleness. Not

10. Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 113.

11. LW 14.140 (WA 18.480).

12. LW 14.140 (WA 18.480).

13. LW 10.81 (WA 3.72).

that the psalmist wished to be relieved of God's discipline, but that God's discipline be given him in grace as a child by his father. As proof, Luther quoted Augustine favorably: "O God, bear down there, strike here, beat here, but spare us in yonder life."¹⁴ George explains beautifully: "For Luther God is a Father who shows his kindness through his wrath but once we have passed through the fire of his wrath we find Christ."¹⁵ The law-gospel schema is Luther's hermeneutical key to reading holy things fruitfully.

Weight of the Law, Alien Work and Proper Work

Basic to Luther's hermeneutical approach is the crucial distinction between law and gospel, a theme that already appears in his *Heidelberg Disputation*, in 1518.

...the law makes us aware of sin so that, having recognized our sin, we may seek and receive his grace... The law humbles, grace exalts. The law effects fear and wrath, grace effects hope and mercy.... Thus an action which is alien to God's nature results in a deed belonging to his very nature: he makes a person a sinner so that he may make him righteous.¹⁶

A proper understanding of law and gospel was essential for the proper interpretation of the Scripture and the correct way of doing theology. Here in 1525, Luther continued with the same approach in reading Psalm 6. Commenting on verse 2,

14. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book IV as quoted in LW 14.141 (WA 18.481).

15. George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers*, 97.

16. LW 31.50–51. See also Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 254ff; Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther. Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 50–55.

“Be gracious to me, O Lord. O Lord, heal me. For my bones are troubled,” Luther applied the theological use of the law to harvest holy fruits from it. Accordingly he read that the psalmist feels the weight of the law, through which he feels his own sins and is terrified by the awful judgement of God. This situation he knows can only be healed by clinging to the grace of God. Thus the psalmist prayed for grace, that by which he may be preserved from dissolution and sheer despair in fear and terror. At the threat of God’s punishment, the psalmist lamented his helpless estate before God, “For my bones are troubled.” This means all his strength and power pass away so that he expects nothing from himself but everything from God. Abiding here is a significant pastoral insight Luther offers to those who encounter disaster, as in death or at the last hour on earth. Luther commented:

Blessed are they who experience this in life, for every man must finally meet his end. When man thus declines and becomes as nothing in all his power, words and being, until there is nothing but a lost, condemned and forsaken sinner, then divine help and strength appear as in Job 11:11-17: “When you think you are devoured, then you shall shine forth as the morning star.”¹⁷

In verse 3: “My soul also is sorely troubled. But Thou, O Lord—how long?” the psalmist further laments his spiritual condition before God. Here Luther speaks of the gracious design of God’s paradoxical work on his people under the appearance of contraries, a feature already appeared in his

17. LW 14.141 (WA 18.481).

Heidelberg Disputation (1518): in order that God might perform his proper work, he performs an alien work, a work that is not intrinsic but alien to his nature.¹⁸ This he does by removing from the psalmist all creaturely consolations and making his soul deeply troubled in order that he might cry and long for God's consolation. Only he who has been "profoundly terrified and forsaken prays profoundly" from the bottom of his heart, thereby reaping the holy fruits—"God's strength and consolation."¹⁹ With Luther, Melancthon said the same thing in his *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (1531): "But God terrifies ... in order to make room for consolation and vivification because hearts that do not feel the wrath of God loathe consolation in their smugness."²⁰

Trials (*Anfechtungen*) are God's alien work, which is intended to break down people's self-confidence and reduce them to a state of doubt and despair in order that they might finally turn to God for aid. It is for this reason that Luther regards God's chastisements as "a blessed comfort."²¹ Therefore it is folly for despairing hearts to remain secure in their own devices, repudiating God's gracious design aimed at them: "God hides and imparts his goodness under wrath and chastisement."²² Hidden under God's wrath is his mercy;

18. LW 31.51.

19. LW 14.141 (WA 18.481).

20. See *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, XI.51. Also quoted in Timothy J. Wengert, "Peace, Peace ... Cross, Cross': Reflections on How Martin Luther Relates the Theology of the Cross to Suffering," *Theology Today* 59, no. 2 (July 2002), 200.

21. LW 14.142 (WA 18.481).

hidden under his chastisement is God's goodness. For Luther, the horror of human sin and the terror of God's wrath are real, not to be blunted or discounted.²³ It was from his experience of how real God's anger was that he gained deep insight into the underlying love God has for damnable, miserable sinners. The reality of a saving relationship is encountered in the paradoxical act of God, the one who works within the distinction between God's wrath and his mercy, law and gospel, God's alien work and his proper work.²⁴

Suffering the Inner Hurt of the Soul and the Feeling of Being Forsaken

Verse 3, "But thou, O Lord—how long?" shows that lament is framed with the language of desperation and protest. In an exaggerated fashion, the psalmist paints his sorrowful plight in verse 6: "I am weary with my moaning. Every night I flood my bed with my weeping. I drench my couch with my weeping." In troubling times where tears are excessive, fear

22. LW 14.142 (WA 18.481).

23. See, for instance, Steven D. Paulson, "The Wrath of God," *Dialog* 33, no. 4 (1994): 245–51, where he argued that Luther saw the theological necessity for "the church's ministry of reconciliation to speak of God's wrath. For him, God does not have wrath among other anthropomorphic feelings. God is wrath, and becomes love in relation to particular persons only through the church's proclamation.... If the gospel is an eschatological reality, then God's wrath must also be real."

24. Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God. The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 55: "[The paradoxical distinction] is not a prescriptive statement but purely descriptive; it says that this is what our condition and our experience of it is. The rest is speculation. It seems as if God has abandoned us. Those who realize this are no longer resisting God's grace; nevertheless revolt and lament is not to be shunned." See also Wengert, "'Peace, Peace ... Cross, Cross': Reflections on How Martin Luther Relates the Theology of the Cross to Suffering," 200.

seems endless, and pain is unbearable, the psalmist protests against the working of divine providence. He complains against God for being indifferent and inactive immeasurably long. Alongside the wrath of God, Luther takes very seriously his indifference. The sense that God has forsaken or abandoned us is more intolerable than the sense of his wrath. Luther wrote: “Then a horrible terror and, as it were, the beginning of damnation is felt, as is written in Ps. 30:7: ‘Thou didst hide Thy face, I was dismayed.’”²⁵ Couched in existential language and written in an evocative style, Luther conceived the psalmist’s condition as “the inner hurt of the soul, the feeling of being forsaken and rejected by God.”²⁶ This is “the severest and greatest illness of the soul, where it must perish eternally if it should remain in such a state.”²⁷ God offers the psalmist an eschatological foretaste of the pain of God-forsakenness in hell in order that he might grasp God as the Savior of his life. “There is no greater pain than the gnawing pangs of conscience, which occur when God withholds truth, righteousness, wisdom, etc., and nothing remains but sin, darkness, pain, and woe.”²⁸ This existential experience of God-forsakenness so pierces his soul that the psalmist is compelled to invoke God’s return or intervention, or else he might perish eternally. In verse 4, he makes a plea for God’s help: “Turn, O Lord, save my life.” Whilst God’s turning away from us implies “an inner rejecting and forsaking,” for Luther, God’s turning toward or returning

25. LW 14.142 (WA 18.481).

26. LW 14.142 (WA 18.481).

27. LW 14.142 (WA 18.481).

28. LW 14.142 (WA 18.481).

to us implies “inner consolation and a sustaining in joyous hope.”²⁹ The psalmist’s cries move God to turn away from his wrath and entreat him with his mercy, consolation, and hope.

Commenting on verse 5, “For in death there is no remembrance of Thee; in hell, who shall give Thee thanks?” Luther portrayed the psalmist’s situation as that of death, not temporal but spiritual death, when the soul is dead. “For sin is the death of the soul, and pain is its hell. Both are felt by one who lies in this distress, namely, in sin and in punishment for sin.”³⁰ The tribulation the psalmist undergoes is “a door and entrance into eternal sin and punishment, that is, into death and hell.”³¹ The psalmist was terrorized by the thought that he might consummate his life under divine wrath and descend to hell, forever excluded from the praise of God. Luther quoted Isa. 38:10, where King Hezekiah spoke of his experience of the horrible terror in hell: “I have said in great terror: I must enter the gates of hell in the midst of my days, that is, when I thought I was in the best years of my life.”³² The assailed came face-to-face with the most terrifying battle of all, the battle with death and hell, about which he cannot do anything. His soul is so severely burdened with affliction that he said in verse 7: “My body wastes away because of my grief.” Luther borrowed a New Testament image to elucidate that the situation of the psalmist is likened unto that of “the poor and deformed Lazarus” (Lk. 16:19–20).³³ This graphic

29. LW 14.142 (WA 18.481).

30. LW 14.143 (WA 18.482).

31. LW 14.143 (WA 18.482).

32. LW 14.142 (WA 18.481).

33. LW 14.144–45 (WA 18.483–84).

description conveys the effect that the psalmist's feeling of rejection brings: all his strength, merit, and worthiness are reduced to nothing; there is no comfort, except "only terror and wrath of God."³⁴ In the abyss of nothingness, the poor soul realizes that he has "nothing left but crying, imploring and praying."³⁵ Luther stressed: "This is what this temptation [*tentatio/anfechtung*] does."³⁶ The experience of nothingness is God's alien work, through which God crushes the claim of the believers to righteousness before him in order that they might cling to God alone as their redeemer.³⁷ This experience thus causes the psalmist to lament with profit, moving him from nothingness to blessedness, from wrath to mercy, from hurt to joy, from lamentation to praise. Ultimately God's grace is to be praised; all human works are reduced to naught. With relief, the psalmist acknowledged in verses 8b and 9, "For the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping. [He] has heard my supplication; the Lord accepts my prayer."³⁸

Evangelical Concern for Enemies

Commenting on Ps. 6:8: "Depart from me, all you workers of evil," Luther quoted Matt. 7:22 to emphasize that Christ condemned the proud holy ones and wished that they might feel God's wrath or come to the knowledge of their sins and

34. LW 14.143 (WA 18.482).

35. LW 14.145 (WA 18.484).

36. LW 14.143 (WA 18.431–32).

37. See Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering. Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 112–13.

38. LW 14.145 (WA 18.434).