

Foreword

All God's children really do have troubles. Martin Luther knew that from his own experience. He identified the origin of these troubles and the wickedness behind them in the doubt that broke the relationship between the Creator and his first human creatures. When Eve and Adam doubted the word the Lord had given them, they changed the orientation of their lives and brought disorder, dysfunctions of many kinds, and finally despair into daily human experience. Turning away from God as the first and last conversation partner of the day had introduced turmoil, tribulations of many kinds, and tragedies into the warp and woof of the reality human beings regularly face.

In the midst of such trials and troubles, believers often find it difficult to know whether Satan is the enemy or whether God has either become an active adversary or simply abandoned and forgotten them. The testing of tribulation can seem to invite God's faithful people to return to the doubt of Eden.

In such situations, which he often experienced, Martin

Luther defied the doubt that beset him with the words of 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 ringing through his thinking. God's ways are indeed not our ways, his thoughts quite different from ours. His wisdom and his power appear to be quite foolish and utterly impotent and his plan for restoring humanity through death on the cross absurd and ineffective. The word that delivers the benefits of Christ's dying and rising for his chosen people also seems foolish and impotent. But precisely in the death and resurrection of Jesus Luther found the exhibition and the experience of God's re-creative power as he puts sinners' identity to death and raises them up to walk as new creatures in Jesus' footsteps. He formulated his understanding of God's seemingly strange *modus operandi* as the "theology of the cross." This *theologia crucis* focuses on how Christians are to function as "theologians of the cross" rather than pursuing a theology of glory. Theologians of glory seek in one way or another to establish God's glory in "Gentile" terms (Mark 10:42–45), and they seek to establish human glory through reason's mastery of truth and the mastery of good works and godly performance over human destiny.

His new identity in Christ gave the Wittenberg professor and preacher a firm sense of who he really was by virtue of the almighty word of deliverance and absolution the gospel of Christ brought to him. Thus, in the midst of trial and testing, he could turn to God on the cross to find an anchor for life and a foundation for a sure hope.

Since Job or before, believers have wrestled with the problem of how evil could exist if God is almighty and good,

as Scripture assures us he is. Since Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz three hundred years ago, we have labeled the search for some justification for God in the face of evil “theodicy.” Luther did not know the term, but he knew the human need. He refused to pursue that problem. In his *On Bound Choice* he conceded that the question of evil in the world created by the perfect and almighty God had often driven him to despair, and he counseled waiting for the “light of glory” since neither “the light of nature” nor “the light of grace” gave satisfying answers.¹ Luther believed Paul was correct when he wrote in Romans 3:25–26 that God has justified himself by justifying his chosen people through Christ’s death and resurrection.

Luther identified the Evil One as the cause of all evils. He viewed all of human history as the battlefield on which God and Satan were locked in struggle, God’s truth assured of ultimate victory but Satan’s murderous deceit often seeming to win the battles of daily life (John 8:44). Luther labeled the attacks he experienced in several forms *Anfechtungen*, “assaults,” for even when they came from God, he felt himself under siege. His confidence that God is almighty led him to recognize God’s lordship even over the devil, so he firmly clung to assurance that God would remain his protecting Father.

In the midst of *Anfechtungen* of various kinds, Luther recognized that he had no answer that would give him

1. *Luther’s Works* (Saint Louis/Philadelphia: Concordia/Fortress, 1958–1986), 33:190, 291–92; *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–), 18:719, 9–12, 784, 35–785, 38; cf. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology, a Contemporary Interpretation*, translated by Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 211–13.

mastery over the question of the “why” of sin and evil. Therefore, Luther let God be master and simply turned to him in days of trouble, often with the cry of lament. As with so many elements of his theology, the psalmists gave him words to express what he found in his reading of all of Scripture. In sermons, lectures, and devotional works he turned to God with his plaintive cry for the presence of his loving Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. He cried out to God, longing for the comfort that the Lord’s presence gives, even when the foes—the devil, doubt, and disasters in many forms—assail. When no one else is listening, Luther was confident, God is.²

Dennis Ngien has spent years in the careful study of Luther’s writings, exploring particularly the ways in which Luther’s “theology of the cross” guided his exposition of Scripture and his proclamation of its message. Ngien has shown how Luther’s theology developed between the poles of interpretation of the Scriptures and of pastoral care. In the former he experienced hearing God’s voice addressing him and his contemporaries. In the latter he found arrogant sinners in need of the forthright evaluation of God’s condemning law, and he found distressed sinners in need of the consolation of the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection that would give them confidence to cry out to God, also with lament.

In this volume Ngien recognizes the penitential nature

2. Cf. Oswald Bayer, “Toward a Theology of Lament,” in *Caritas et Reformatio. Essays on Church and Society in Honor of Carter Lindberg*, edited by David Whitford (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2002), 211–20.

of many laments and builds upon the contrite approach to God of those who trust in Christ and in him recognize the Father's love. As the Holy Spirit moves the faithful from remorse to reliance on Christ's sacrifice and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of their relationship with their Creator, they gain a sense of sureness that permits them to lay their laments before their God. Ngien's conversation with Luther continues into Psalm texts that further illuminate the role of lament in the dialogue of human faith with the Faithful One as he explores further dimensions of lament in Luther's thought and exposition of God's word.

Ngien takes readers of this volume into his exchange with Luther and aids them in finding new and refreshing uses of these cries of agony and dismay from ancient believers and the early modern reformer. For times such as ours, being able to take our woes, weariness, and wailings to our Lord's lap and leave them there is a gift of his grace that does us immeasurable good. This book will help its readers and their conversation partners to grow in trust in the God who has shared our trials and triumphed over them so that they can cry out with Luther and the psalmists, in the common hope that is theirs through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Robert Kolb
Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis
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