



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

O God, the protector of all that trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy; Increase and multiply upon us thy mercy; that, thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal: Grant this, O heavenly Father, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer, Trinity 4

Week #4b: Luther on Suffering and Spiritual Warfare

Previously we talked about Luther's concept of *Anfechtung* ("trial," "temptation," "challenge," "assault"). This has sometimes been compared with the medieval monastic concept of *compunctio* ("compunction"—a painful consciousness of and sorrow for sin), which is a work of God in the soul that is necessary for one's spiritual advance, since it leads one to despair of oneself, so that one's resistance to God is broken down. This makes it possible for one to be spiritually awakened and redirected toward higher things, so that one may be recalled by God and may yield to Him.

Anfechtung is similar in some ways. It is a work of God's power and mercy (*miser cordia Dei*) in the soul that makes one despair of oneself, awakens one to one's own need and moves one to yield to God and depend upon divine grace. Thus like *compunctio*, it is a passive suffering of what come to one from without by God's design to turn the person away from reliance on self toward a yielding of oneself to God. At the same time, in contrast to *compunctio*, *Anfechtung* is viewed as more closely related to doubt (seen as a challenge to faith/trust). *Anfechtung* is also defined more Christologically, i.e. forsakenness by God and the temptation to despair are seen as necessarily (in this life) the lot of everyone who follows Christ and is therefore included in his sufferings (which are in fact a sign of God's favor/election/salvation which has been hidden under an apparently contrary visible form).

"On the Cross and Suffering, Preached at Coburg"

The Cross as an example we are to follow in our suffering (which we did not choose) and we must submit ourselves to it if we are to be conformed to Christ through being crucified with him. (This passive, faithful endurance of ordinary, mundane suffering is to be contrasted with the mortifications voluntarily chosen by persons seeking to strive for merit.)

Christ's suffering is mightier and breaks the power of sin, death and evil. If Christ was to suffer and we are in him, we will find opposition and suffering inevitably to be present in our own lives, for we are not greater than our Lord. We must therefore accept that Christ's suffering is mightier than any other thing and breaks the power of sin, death and evil. Knowing this, we accept Christ's suffering and are included in it. In this way, the

word and promises of God, when viewed with faith, are a consolation that is greater than our suffering and fear. Even our suffering can therefore work to our good because it is touched, informed and shaped by Christ's suffering and in this we learn the power of the Word even when it is hidden under a contrary appearance on the Cross. When we learn to rely not on what is visible but in what is hidden, we can come to have a certain confidence in the promise of God and a renewed and unshakeable commitment to the cause of God. Luther describes this as "the art of looking to the word and looking away from all the trouble and suffering that lies upon us and weighs us down."

The alternative, as Luther sees it, is to trust in what is visible and tangible and this is disastrous since in this way "one sees no farther than the present suffering. For this is also the way of the devil; he removes the word from one's eyes, so that one sees nothing but present difficulty, just as he is doing with us now. What he wants is that we should deny and forget the Word altogether and gaze only at the danger which threatens us..." This leads one to despair, so that one loses faith and perishes, having given one's mind over to the devil's lies and placed one's faith in them.

"Comfort for Women Who Have Had a Miscarriage"

Luther urges the believer to consider that suffering and loss are not a sign of God's anger or punishment and discourages enquiry into God's hidden judgments. Trials are instead to be as occasions in which patient faith can grow.

Parents who despair because their child died unbaptized should be counseled that the parental desire to bring the child to baptism is sufficient for God looks to the heart and is able to accomplish much through the prayers of believers, which he hears (for it was God who gave one the grace to pray and His Spirit intercedes for us in our weakness), even though the one who is the object of prayer lacks personal faith. We must trust that God is a God who is able to do far more than all we can ask or think, not falling into doubt and uncertainty but trusting that is faithful, good and hears the prayers of believers.

Comfort When Facing Temptations

When assaulted/tempted by trials,

- one must not rely on oneself;
- be guided by one's feelings or yield to them;
- feel oneself alone in this temptation, as if one were subjected to something others have not experienced.

Instead, one must place one's whole trust in God's promises and worship God, rather than demanding from God an immediate end to this unpleasant and difficult situation, for this experience is one from which certain good things can issue.

Cf. Tappert, 89-90.

A Sermon on Preparing to Die

Earlier in his fifteenth thesis on indulgences, Luther had observed, "This fear or horror [of dying] is sufficient in itself, to say nothing of other things, to constitute the penalty of purgatory, since it is very near the horror of despair" (Lohse, p. 88).

Need to prepare oneself to face the terrors of death by taking leave of the things of this life and setting our affairs in order:

- forgiving those who have offended us;

- seeking the forgiveness of all those we have offended;
- confess our sins to God
- receive the sacraments (trust in the external word spoken by Christ's representative in accordance with Christ's promise) that one might have a firm faith and not doubt that the promise is true

The alternative is to dread the coming of death, being unwilling to die. By cultivating a love and concern for this life, one tries futilely to hold onto this life instead of to God's word of promise and thus becomes disobedient to God.

To strengthen oneself against this temptation, Luther recommends a kind of advanced planning for death, becoming familiar with it and coming to terms with it well before one has to face it oneself. Luther does, however, caution against brooding on death too much or trying to look into God's secret counsels, so that, in facing death, one can know whether one is chosen or not. (The latter, Luther says, can only lead one to become impatient with God for not offering clear evidences concerning this, thus displaying a diminished respect for the transcendence of God's knowledge/wisdom over human knowledge/wisdom and consequently a decline in the love of God.)

Luther argues that one must drive out every image associated with the temptation to fear death. This occurs in four ways:

- (1) You must "look at death while you are alive and see sin in the light of grace and hell in the light of heaven, permitting nothing to divert you from that view" and accept no other view. In other words, one must not ponder death in and of itself, nor the death that unrepentant sinners die (for these are things not relevant to us), but rather the death and vindication of Christ and the death and reward of God's saints whose sins have been taken over by Christ and swallowed up and overcome by his righteousness.
- (2) One must not contemplate predestination in relation to hell and eternal suffering, but rather direct one's gaze to Christ upon the Cross, in whom one's election is made sure.
- (3) When faced with death, one must not doubt whether one is alone, for God's word of promise assures us that this is not the case.
- (4) One must use the sacraments with faith, accepting these as a "sure sign of his grace that Christ overcame death in his death" and that "his love destroyed my hell in his forgiveness," for God does not lie, but is trustworthy and truthful in all that he says and promises.