



Meditation Before Studying Theology

When you are tempted by the enemy, the best remedy is to hasten with all speed to the Cross, and to see Christ thereon, covered with wounds, torn, disfigured, streaming with blood. Then reflect that the chief reason why he is there is to destroy sin; and so, with all devotion, beg him not to allow what is so abominable, and what he sought, with such labor, to overthrow, ever to reign in our hearts.

--Peter of Alcántara (1499-1562), *Treatise on Prayer and Meditation*

Prayer Before Studying Theology:

O God, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright; grant to us such strength and protection, as may support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

--Book of Common Prayer

(Review of Luther's Theology of the Cross)

At the beginning of the Christian life, we were passive while God acted upon us to create and stir up faith within our darkened minds and hardened hearts.

Later, however, there is a time when we are asked to be active in responding and looking to the crucified and risen Christ when we are afflicted and tempted.

- See "Meditation on Christ's Passion," p. 13 (bottom; section 15).
- See also the language about Christ setting forth his suffering as an example to us in "Coburg," p. 198.

Week #4a: Luther on Trials and the Temptation to Despair

Anfechtungen is a plural noun that is difficult to translate into English ("troubles", "trials" or "temptations").

There are two basic forms of temptation:

The first type of temptations are those which

- arise from threats to our bodily well-being or very adverse circumstances;
- are discomfiting or painful and
- tempt us to become bitter and impatient (illness, poverty, dishonor, etc.),

in other words, "the kind of suffering that is worthy of the name and honestly grips and hurts, such as some great danger of property, honor, body and life. Such suffering as we

really feel, which weighs us down; otherwise, if it did not hurt us badly, it would not be suffering” (“Coburg,” p. 198).

- Such suffering cannot be self-chosen: “none should dictate or choose his own cross and suffering, but rather, when it come patiently bear and suffer it” (“Coburg,” p. 199).
- Contrast Luther’s remarks on a “stinking, self-chosen suffering,” which we “frame...in..beautiful monstrosities.” For this distinction, compare “Bear the Cross,” p. 183 (bottom)-184 (top).

Read the quotation from Luther in Lohse, 89, which deals with the intensity of facing the immediacy of death and the fears brought on by the doctrine of predestination (=“the experience of the divine wrath operative in the life experiences of suffering and calamity” [Lohse, 89-90] and dwelling on one’s own sin, while doubting that God is good and gracious.

Cf. also Lohse, 90 [top].

Read Tappert, *Luther’s Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 19 [middle].

- No one, Luther says, forced you to suffer for Christ’s sake: “If you don’t want to do it for nothing and without any merit, then you can let it lie and so deny Christ” (“Coburg, p. 199; cf. also “Bear his Cross,” 185 [top]). Compare the top of p. 200 for a further approach to consolation, which focuses on the power of Christ’s sacrifice.

1. Luther contrasts the Christian’s suffering with the non-Christian’s suffering, which always falls back on the buffer of prosperity and maintaining worldly honor (“Coburg,” p. 201 [middle]). When the latter vanish and there is no Word of promise for faith to fall back upon, they panic and become desperate and cannot be comforted, going from one extreme to another based upon their perceptions of their outward circumstances. (This same dynamic is discussed using a different image in the second paragraph of his treatise “That a Christian Should Bear His Cross with Patience.”)

The choice when one faces such painful suffering, Luther holds, is either

- to go through the water holding onto Christ or
- to despair, let go of Christ and drown (“Coburg,” p. 202 [bottom]-203 [top]).

“For this is the Christian art, which we must learn, the art of looking to the Word and looking away from all the trouble and suffering that lies upon us and weighs us down” (“Coburg,” p. 203).

- By this means we learn the power of the Word and war against pride (“Bear His Cross,” p. 184 [middle])
- Christ sanctifies suffering when his own suffering touches it; see “Coburg,” p. 207 [bottom]-208 [top] and “Bear His Cross,” p. 184 [bottom]. Cf. earlier in the quotation from Lohse (89), the phrase “the person is stretched out with Christ.”

- Through personally confronting these particular sufferings (coming to terms with miscarriage, facing death, etc.), we are reminded that others are passing through similar hardships and sufferings; see “Grave Temptations,” p. 183.

The second type of temptations are those which involve pleasure to be pursued (e.g. lust) and honor to be gained (worldly advance and public honor); see Tappert, 19 [middle].

These cause one to

- forget God,
- become independent and
- lapse into fatal smugness;

Here the person is in perilous state precisely because they are in no distress over their state and do not recognize their departure from God or its significance.

- *Nulla tentatio – omnis tentatio*: “No temptation is every temptation.”

Either of these types of temptations, i.e.

- those which are painful and tempt us to become bitter and
 - those which are pleasant but tempt us to forget God so we can get more
- can attack and weaken faith and, where faith is weakened, a certain deeply felt malaise or a persistent anxiety and agitation can appear.

This can take the form of

- (1) a severe disillusionment or dissatisfaction with oneself and one’s situation (e.g. one’s marriage or the amount of money one has), with a tendency toward destructive doubt, self-accusation and self-reproach (magnifying feelings of having fallen short of the mark and being guilty, condemned and without hope: “What if you were wrong, and if you should lead all these people into error and eternal damnation”),
- (2) a grief, sadness or heaviness of spirit which renders one despondent and makes prayer difficult and unsatisfying, or
- (3) a devastating, terrifying fear of death, judgment, and/or divine wrath, being anxious about one’s own existence “as if God were an ungracious God” (with the body sometimes being severely affected by this fear—trembling, quivering, weeping, sweating—that one is unable to pray).

The onset of these feelings may be so sudden and severe that one is virtually crippled by the resulting depression and anxiety.

Although it may appear at these times of trial that God has forgotten them, turned away and withdrawn his good will, or is absent or non-existent, God is fact present and at work in a hidden way, just as he was when Christ suffered bitter agony on the Cross (revealing himself in a hidden way under the appearance of contrary things).

- Learning to deal rightly with *Anfechtungen*, doubt and despair is necessary if one is to renounce one’s self-reliance and carnal self-confidence and faith in God and a fundamental orientation of one’s life toward God are instead to grow.

- Luther: “without them [sc. *Anfechtungen*] no person is able to know Holy Scripture, nor faith, the fear and love of God; indeed he is not able to know what the Spirit is, having never been in temptations.”

(Note that faith and hope are in things not presently perceived by the senses. Only with faith and the experience of *Anfechtungen* we can learn to distinguish between God and the Devil. Reason, which cannot accept revelatory insight, will fail to discern God’s hidden activity and benevolence and will therefore ultimately imagine God to be the Devil [questioning God’s goodness and believing that one is experiencing his wrath] and the Devil to be God [since his works seem attractive and beneficial] and be confused about who is really in control: If the trials I experience arise from God’s love, “Ah, how I would like him to love others and not me!” The result is a conclusion that is at once religious in content and yet fictitious in character and one begins to hate and blaspheme God.)

The fundamental answer to *Anfechtungen* is

- to hear the Word of God (“I am the Lord your God”) [read Saphir, *Our Lord’s Pattern of Prayer*, 141 n.] and
- to find in that Word the promise of God and
- to accept that in Christ this is a promise extended to oneself, driving away all competing thoughts and opinions to make room for faith:
 - “I know thou wilt not lie to me. No matter how thou mayest appear, thou wilt keep what thou hast promised, that and nothing else.”

See Tappert, 20 [middle]; 92 [top].

It is to reach out to and reinforce our weak faith, nearly lost in time of trial, that Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper have been given, for there the Word of promise is symbolized and sealed by something that can be clearly be discerned by the senses.

In the same way, the prayers and help of other believers can point us to the promise of God when we find ourselves unable to read or hear the promises for ourselves due to our distress. See Tappert, 96 [middle to bottom].

For this same reason, when tempted to despair, it is not good for us to be alone with ourselves; see Tappert 19 [bottom]; 85 [top], 86 [bottom], 91 [middle], 95 [middle to bottom].

Particularly morbid patterns of self-examination and self-evaluation can sometimes also be remedied by diversion, which breaks or interrupts the unhealthy pattern.

- Releasing oneself to deal with external matters can therefore be an act of faith in God (*Gelassenheit*=calm, composed, confident resignation to the will of a good God), rather than a faithless escape (attempting to lose oneself in external busyness).
- In such cases, one cannot reason oneself out of false and morbid patterns of reasoning, but it is better to be outwardly engaged (see Tappert, 20 [top]).
- At times when one is weak and tempted to despair, it is not good to fast or overstrain one’s nature by too much fasting, overly extended periods of prayer or other demanding works (cf. Tappert, 88).

It is interesting to note the connection between Luther’s discussion of *Anfechtungen* and his theology of the Cross:

“When you think that our Lord God has *rejected* a person, you should think that our Lord God *has him in His arms and is pressing him to His heart*.

When we supposed that someone has been *deserted and rejected by God*, then we should conclude that he is *in the embrace and the lap of God*.”

All of this is very reminiscent of the paradoxes found in the theses of the Heidelberg Disputation discussed by Forde. “Faith is a change and renewal of the entire nature, so that the ears, the eyes and the very heart hear, see, and feel something altogether different from what everyone else perceives.” Scaer (p. 16) summarizes this more briefly but less pointedly, “What he [sc. the believer] knows about God’s graciousness in Christ is contradicted by what he really experiences in the world.”

Cf. Tappert, 87.