

CONTENTS

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For the Life of the World

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

FEATURES

4 Luther and Walther: Receivers of Grace By Todd A. Peperkorn

In looking at the lives of these two men, we can see the story of God's persevering love and mercy shine forth time and time again. We can also see examples about how both of them went through dark times, and how both of them needed the help and encouragement of others to bring them up out of the pit of despair.

7 I'm Lifting My Eyes, Oh LORD.... But for "How Long?"

By Rick Marrs

Generations of believers before the 1918 flu, even in Old Testament times, were constantly aware that epidemics or contaminations could take the life of a healthy person within days, even hours. Our ancestors knew the path of their lives was fragile. We moderns have falsely embraced the belief that the medical field will overcome our diseases, despite the fact that we know even the best medicine only delays the journey toward death. Only Jesus has overcome our death, through His cross and resurrection on a hill called Zion.

10 Leaning into the Lament in Our Hymnody By Matthew A. Machemer

In 1518 Martin Luther wrote, "A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is." In the last two years, we have been plagued by COVID, mandates, virtue signaling, tribalism, faithlessness, and uncertainty. The effect on our churches has been significant. The effect on ourselves is no less significant. While we are tempted to search for a silver lining in all of this, we know the truth. Humanity is sinful, as is God's once perfect creation.

Also in this Issue:

What Does This Mean?	13
Instructor Focus: Matthew Machemer	14
CTSFW Events	16
Alumni Reunion	17
Called to Serve	18
Alumni Focus: Rev. Michael Schuermann . . .	20
Different Gifts, Same Care	22
Profiles in Giving	24
Admission	26
In the Word Bible Study	30

Leaning into the Lam



Photo: Erik M. Lunsford/The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

In 1518 Martin Luther wrote, “A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing *what it actually is*.”¹ This pithy phrase warrants some serious reflection in our days. In the last two years, we have been plagued by COVID, mandates, virtue signaling, tribalism, faithlessness, and uncertainty. The effect on our churches has been significant. The effect on ourselves is no less significant. Mental Health America reports, “the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire population of the country. While the risk of contracting the disease itself is a population-wide traumatizing event, our physical and social environments have changed as well, leading to greater rates of isolation and loneliness, financial hardship, housing and food insecurity, and interpersonal violence.”² While we are tempted to search for a silver lining in all of this, we know the truth. Humanity is sinful, as is God’s once perfect creation. And when our lives become tragic, this inherent sinfulness is brought to the fore. In a sense, COVID has done all of us a favor by showing us that our attempts to solve the world’s problems and usher in a perfect society are futile. So, with Luther, we learn to be theologians of the cross: calling a thing what it is. We are broken people, attending broken churches, living in broken communities. Some of this is our own doing. Some of this has been done to us.

ent in Our Hymnody

Matthew A. Macheimer

Now is a time for us to rediscover lament. The Bible speaks of lament often, recording numerous instances where the patriarchs and prophets, the heroes of faith, cry out to God in lament; sometimes even accusing Him of wrongdoing! Yet, we cannot rightfully lament until we learn one difficult truth. Everything that happens to us in this life, whether good or bad, is permitted by God Himself. “When souls in our families and congregations suffer—when people in our neighborhoods and in our world suffer and die—our instinct is to explain the suffering away in an effort to defend God. This instinct is contrary to God’s Word . . . in fact, it is harmful to those who are suffering.”³ So we acknowledge that our suffering is allowed by God, saying with Job “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD (Job 1:21).” Far from being a cry of unbelief, our lament to God is a sign of *true faith*. The one who cries out to God must first believe that He is all-powerful and has allowed our suffering! The unholy trinity of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature would cause us no suffering if God chose to prohibit them.

The Church’s first hymnal, the Book of Psalms, provides us with a pattern for lament. Consider these words of David, as recorded in Psalm 13.

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I take counsel in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
(Psalm 13:1–2)

David is not interested in having a polite and rational discussion with God regarding the evil that has befallen him. “He knows the real reason for his

distress. Yahweh has forgotten him. Yahweh has hidden his face from him . . . that realization does not paralyze him; it aggravates him.”⁴ You may ask, how can David speak to God like this? How can God expect *me* to speak to Him like this? The answer to these questions is simple. David speaks to God this way because he is a member of God’s covenantal people. He has the right. We, as baptized Christians, also enjoy this right. We have entered into a covenantal relationship with God; not by means of our own actions, but by means of God’s gracious invitation through Jesus Christ. So we cry to Him with audacity, knowing “that things are not as they ought to be. Since suffering comes upon us without our wanting and willing it, but by God’s imposition, we are passive sufferers.”⁵

In addition to the psalter, the Church’s hymnody provides us with a pattern for our laments. They speak to us not only of God’s allowance of our suffering but also of His grace for us *in* our suffering. Like the Psalms, hymns give us words to sing when the anguish of our lives has caused our throats to run dry and our hearts to despair.

Consider these words from the hymn “What God Ordains Is Always Good.” God ordains the bitterness of our lives. He does this not because He delights in our trouble, but so that He might comfort us in our sorrows.

What God ordains is always good:
Though I the cup am drinking
Which savors now of bitterness,
I take it without shrinking.
For after grief
God gives relief,
My heart with comfort filling
And all my sorrow stilling.
(*Lutheran Service Book* 760, stanza 5).



Photo: Erik M. Lunsford/The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod



While God may seem silent, He is not inactive. He uses our suffering to bring us closer to Him, to focus our eyes on His Son, the One who has suffered in our stead. Jesus Christ promises an end to our suffering, and His anguish on the cross gives our suffering meaning. The Lord has ordained a time for all things. So even now, while we suffer, we sing to Him in faith. We know that, in His good time, He will alleviate our misery and bring us into the joy of eternity.

Georg Neumark’s fabulous hymn, “If Thou But Trust in God to Guide Thee,” reminds us that God *wants* to hear our laments. He desires us to hold Him to His promise: to place the work of Christ before His eyes when we are suffering. Sometimes He will give us what we pray for and relieve our distress. Other times He will allow our suffering to continue: not because He has cast us off, but because, in His wisdom, and for Christ’s sake, our trouble is for our benefit.

Nor think amid the fiery trial
That God hath cast thee off unheard,
That he whose hopes meet no denial
Must surely be of God preferred.
Time passes and much change doth bring
And sets a bound to ev’rything.

(Lutheran Service Book 750, stanza 5)

Indeed, there is a time for all things. Right now, we find ourselves in times of uncertainty. As our nation rages and our kingdoms totter, we desire that God would utter His voice into our broken lives. COVID has left many feeling alone and unloved. Careers that we have spent years building up have come toppling down. And while God may seem silent, He is not inactive. He uses our suffering to bring us closer to Him, to focus our eyes on His Son, the One who has suffered in our stead. Jesus Christ promises an end to our suffering, and His anguish on the cross gives our suffering meaning. The Lord has ordained a time for all things. So even now, while we suffer, we sing to Him in faith. We know that, in His good time, He will alleviate our misery and bring us into the joy of eternity.

There is a time for ev’rything,
A time for all that life may bring:
A time to plant, a time to reap,
A time to laugh, a time to weep,
A time to heal, a time to slay,
A time to build where rubble lay,
A time to die, a time to mourn,
A time for joy and to be born,

A time to hold, then be alone,
A time to gather scattered stone,
A time to break, a time to mend,
A time to search and then to end,
A time to keep, then throw away,
A time to speak, then nothing say,
A time for war till hatreds cease,
A time for love, a time for peace.

Eternal Lord, Your wisdom sees
And fathoms all life’s tragedies;
You know our grief, You hear our sighs—
In mercy, dry our tear-stained eyes.
From evil times, You bring great good;
Beneath the cross, we’ve safely stood.
Though dimly now life’s path we trace,
One day we shall see face to face.

Before all time had yet begun,
You, Father, planned to give Your Son;
Lord Jesus Christ, with timeless grace,
You have redeemed our time-bound race;
O Holy Spirit, Paraclete,
Your timely work in us complete;
Blest Trinity, Your praise we sing—
There is a time for ev’rything! 🙏
(Lutheran Service Book 762)⁶

- 1 *Book of Concord*, <https://bookofconcord.org/sources-and-context/heidelberg-disputation>
- 2 “Spotlight 2021 – COVID 19 and Mental Health,” <https://mhanational.org/sites/default/files/Spotlight%202021%20-%20COVID-19%20and%20Mental%20Health.pdf>
- 3 Gregory P. Schulz, *The Problem of Suffering: Parts One and Two* (presented at “Encore” Conference of Doxology: The Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel, Saint John’s Abbey, Collegeville, MN, February 10–12, 2017).
- 4 Timothy Saleska, *Psalms 1–50* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2020), 285.
- 5 Gregory P. Schulz, “Pain, Suffering, Lament,” *LOGIA*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Eastertide 2015), 12.
- 6 *Lutheran Service Book*. Prepared by the Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis, MO: 2006), 762.

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