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The Divine Game: Faith and the Reconciliation of Opposites in Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*

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In his running commentary upon the trials and misfortunes of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, Martin Luther wrestles with some of the darkest passages in all of Scripture. To the reformer, however, these tribulations serve not as a counsel of despair and doubt but as a very great comfort to all the saints who suffer affliction and cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" As Luther quotes Wisdom in the book of Proverbs, "And I play in his world, and my fun is with the sons of men" (Prov 8:31, cf. Vulgate.),[1] such human trials as the godly experience are in reality a *ludus divinus*, or divine game, through which they are purged and strengthened. It will be the purpose of this study to examine closely the reformer's comments upon the relevant texts within the *Lectures on Genesis* in order to uncover a general pattern in Luther's treatment of these passages and to relate these findings to the major themes of his theology.

The *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545) hold a significant place within the canon of the reformer's work. Comprising three volumes of the Weimar Edition (eight of the American), they remain the major literary achievement of the last decade of his life, and could even be said to contain the full flowering of his thought and a summary of his entire theology.[2] In these *Enarrationes*, or line-by-line commentaries on the biblical texts, the

[1] "Ludo praeterea in orbe terrae eius, et deliciae meae sunt cum filiuis hominum." *Genesisvorlesung* in *Martin Luther, Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften], 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993)*, 44:466 (hereafter *WA*); Friedrich Gogarten, "The Unity of History," *Theology Today* 15 (July, 1958): 205.

[2] Johannes Schwanke, "Luther on Creation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002): 1. Asendorf refers to the Genesis lectures as Luther's *"Summa Theologiae."* Ulrich Asendorf, "Die ökumenische Bedeutung von Luthers Genesis-Vorlesung (1535–1545)" in *Caritas Dei: Beiträge zum Verständnis Luthers und der gegenwärtigen Ökumene: Festschrift für Tuomo Mannermaa zum 60. Geburtstag*, eds. Oswald Bayer, Robert W. Jenson, Simo Knuuttila (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1997), 19; cf. Heiko Obermann, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, tr. Eileem Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 166.

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aging and ailing Luther, knowing his life is nearing its end, appears to pour out all of himself—his life experiences, triumphs and failures, his theological battles (old and new), his sufferings and persecutions, his humor and vitriol, his pastor's heart, and above all, his passion for the Word of God—as he seeks to form the minds of his theological students, preparing them for the inevitable spiritual battles that lie ahead.[3]

It must be noted at the outset that the textual integrity of these lectures has come under a cloud of suspicion, beginning 80 years ago with the work of Erich Seeberg, and later Peter Meinhold.[4] Most critical are their assertions that the *Lectures on Genesis* contain "traces of an alien theology" *(die Spuren einer fremden Theologie)* and corrections on theological issues relevant to growing struggles within later Lutheranism.[5] It must be admitted that, unlike the reformer's earlier works, these published lectures did not receive his usual close scrutiny; [6] only one of the four original volumes had been published before his death. That at least some additions were made by a succession of editors, each under the influence of Melanchthon, seems clear.

In recent decades, however, Meinhold's conclusions have been severely qualified, and some entirely dismissed, by such scholars as Klaus, Delius, and Asendorf.[7] A major argument in defense of the text is that Meinhold has weakened his own arguments from the start by employing the writings of the younger, rather than the older Luther as a theological baseline. As mentioned, Luther himself did write both a preface and postscript to the first published volume (1544), thus giving his approval, at

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[3] John A. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Kirksville, Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2008), 2, 9.

[4] Erich Seeberg, *Studien zu Luthers Genesisvorlesung: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage nach dem alten Luther* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1932); Peter Meinhold, *Die Genesisvorelsung Luthers und ihre Herausgeber (Veit Dietrich, Michael Roting, Hieronymus Besold),* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936). I also refer the reader to the excellent summary of relevant scholarship in Mickey Leland Mattox, *"Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs": Martin Luther's Interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the Enarrationes in Genesis, 1535–1545* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 264–273.

[5] Meinhold, *Die Genesisvorlesung,* 370.

[6] James A. Nestingen, "Luther in Front of the Text: the Genesis Commentary," *Word & World* 14 (Spring, 1994): 187.

[7] Bernhard Klaus, "Die Lutherüberlieferung Veit Dietrichs und ihre Problematik," *Zeitschrift für bayerische Kirchengeschichte,* 53 (1984): 33–47; Hans-Ulrich Delius, *Die Quellen von Martin Luthers Genesisvorlesung,* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1992); Ulrich Asendorf, *Lectura in Biblia: Luthers Genesisvorlesung (1535–1545),* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).

least to that redaction.[8] Also, comparison with other later works from the hand of the reformer demonstrates that, despite some obvious and identifiable insertions, the vast majority of the Genesis lectures appears to give us Martin Luther himself, or at least the *vox Lutheri*.[9] Nevertheless, the text remains compromised, at least in some places, and one ought to approach it with eyes open, especially in those areas that became topics of theological dispute following the reformer's death, such as the role of God's law in the life of the community.[10] Yet, in other areas in which we have adequate corroboration from other writings, one can be relatively sure of being on firmer ground.

In his discussion of the suffering and tribulation of the patriarchs in Genesis, it is important to note that, for the reformer, God's sport is a function of *theologia crucis*, Luther's theology of the cross, the lens through which he views the whole of Scripture, faith, and the knowledge of God.[11]

> God places his own under the cross; and although he delays their deliverance, nevertheless in the end he gloriously snatches them out of their dangers and makes them victors, but only after they have first been vexed and have been wearied to despair by sundry conflicts.[12]

Thus, the pattern, like that of Christ's own cross and resurrection, is not one that moves from glory to glory, but from ignominy to glory, and from death to life. Human flesh, however, sets itself against such wisdom and cannot attain it. "The flesh is indeed weak," says Luther; "it groans, howls, and complains, but God says: 'You know nothing; you are a fool! Wisdom belongs to me, and from this cross of yours, I will bring forth the greatest good.'"[13] This cross must be borne and overcome by faith and patience.

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[8] Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis*, 7.

[9] Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis*, 7; Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532–1546*, tr. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 136. In his 1958 Introduction to the American Edition of the lectures, Jaroslav Pelikan acknowledges Meinhold's cautions but contends that the lectures are still "an indispensable source of our knowledge of Luther's thought," and that while the hands of the editors are sometimes at work, "the voice is nevertheless the voice of Luther." Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition (hereafter *AE*), 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 1: xii.

[10] Nestingen, "Luther in Front of the Text," 189.

[11] Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. R.C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 55; Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (New York: Blackwell, 1985), 148–52.

[12] *AE* 2:369; *WA* 42:526.

[13] *AE* 6:352; *WA* 44:263.

For Luther temptation is inevitable. As the Christian lives in the shadow of the cross, life in this world becomes a continual *Anfechtung*, temptation *(tentatio)* in the form of an assault *(impugnatio)*, which becomes a trial or test *(probatio)*.[14] During this ordeal, hell is unleashed, and faith undergoes a barrage of contradictions *(contraria)*, designed to bring us to an end of ourselves by reducing us to a state of doubt and despair. Almost all the saints are tempted by despair, says the reformer, and the more godly they are, the more frequently they will be "attacked" with this weapon of Satan.[15] Yet, for Luther, it is God who is the ultimate source of this assault, whereby he removes all impediments and props that stand in the way of our justification, as well as our sanctification.[16]

Concerning Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, Luther writes, "Because Abraham is the foremost and greatest among the holy patriarchs, he endures truly patriarchal trials, which his descendants would not have been able to bear."[17] Luther's concept of divine sport is a figure drawn from the Holy Scriptures that illustrates how, in the words of the psalmist, "The Lord leads his saints in wondrous wise" (Ps 4:4).[18] The Almighty does not play this way with the ungodly, who "spend their days in prosperity, and in peace go down to Sheol" (Job 21:13). Thus, "to feel God's wrath is a sure sign of life."[19]

According to the reformer, however, our first and most natural response to tribulation is to imagine that God has had a change of mind, or that we have finally committed some "extraordinary" sin that has alienated us from God and the covenant of promise. "By nature we are all in the habit of doing this," Luther writes, and goes on to explain:

> When some physical affliction besets us, our conscience is soon at hand, and the devil torments it by assembling all the circumstance. Therefore a troubled heart looks about and considers how it may have offended God most. This leads to murmuring against God and to the greatest trial, hatred of God."[20]

Those who are untutored in the promise of redemption are the first to be set awash.

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[14] Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 33; McGrath, *Luther's Theology*, 170.
[15] *AE* 4:95; *WA* 43:203.
[16] McGrath, *Luther's Theology*, 170.
[17] *AE* 4:91; *WA* 43:201.
[18] Gogarten, "The Unity of History," 205.
[19] *AE* 7:233; *WA* 44:472.
[20] *AE* 4:93; *WA* 43:202.

As human beings, we are frequently tempted with despair, for what saint ever lived entirely free from this thought: "What if God does not want me to be saved?" Nevertheless, the Scriptures teach us that in such trials we must hold fast to the promises given to us in our baptism, which are "sure and clear."[21] Yet, as soon as we grab hold of this rock, Satan redoubles his attack and continues to whisper that we are not worthy of such a promise. We know that God is merciful and does not lie; yet how many truly understand or believe this? "Rather," says Luther, "when I consider that I am a sinner and that it must be that I am being punished for my sins, I think differently."[22] In that case, God is not our Father, but becomes the devil himself.

Temptation to despair, which usually accompanies all varieties of tribulation, only serves to increase the grief and agony of the flesh (that is, the mind) when the afflicted person complains that he has been cast off by God. Despair, or the abandoning of God's promises, is the last and most serious temptation to unbelief by which the greatest saints are disciplined.[23] Here, the reformer certainly speaks as one who wrestled often with the black dog of depression.[24] Luther's approach to these lectures is deeply rooted in his own personal experience, as well as his pastoral concern.[25] His own trials, which by the date of the Genesis lectures had been extensive indeed, he saw not as exceptional, but rather as characteristic of the *Anfechtung* of the Christian life. Such suffering is the common lot of all Christians—not as satisfaction for sin, as the medieval church taught, but as a means of God's own self-revelation through the cross.[26] This revelation comes about as the result of God's own initiative and terms, a revelation *sub contrariis,* in which God both hides and reveals himself in things that are foolish to human reason.[27] For Luther, the one who is able to withstand this temptation to despair comes to the perfect knowledge of God's will and exclaims with Jacob, "I have seen the Lord, and I did not know that God meant so well with me!" Before this stage is reached, however, life is quite literally a trying experience.[28]

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[21] *AE* 4:93; *WA* 43:202.

[22] *AE* 7:226; *WA* 44:467.

[23] *AE* 6:131; *WA* 44:97.

[24] Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel,* tr. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Westiminster Press, 1960), 93.

[25] H.G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 333; Nestingen, "Luther in Front of the Text," 194.

[26] Heino O. Kadai, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," *CTQ* 63 (1999): 177.

[27] Kadai, "Luther's Theology," 179; McGrath, *Luther's Theology,* 153–161.

[28] *AE* 6:131; *WA* 44:97.

Sadly, according to Luther, our fleshly nature is the first to react in such contradictory circumstances. "There is a contradiction with which God contradicts himself. It is impossible for the flesh to understand this; for it inevitably concludes either that God is lying—and this is blasphemy—or that God hates me—and this leads to despair."[29] In the case of Abraham, human reason, in its limitations, concludes either that the promise itself is a lie or that the command to sacrifice Isaac does not come from God but from the devil. Here, reason's hands are tied; it can do nothing else.[30]

As Robert Kolb notes ironically, "Of all the places to search for God, the last place most people would think to look is the gallows."[31] The Almighty frequently hides under the form of the worst devil, Luther believes, and so we must learn that the goodness, mercy, and power of God cannot be grasped by mere speculation, but must be understood on the basis of faith's experience.[32] God is merciful, wise, and good, desiring to give more than we ask or think. Such mercy as this is far too great for us to fathom by reflection.[33] Yet reason replies, "'These things are indeed excellently and beautifully spoken, but I am experiencing the contrary. [God] is not only sleeping but even snoring; to be sure there is plainly no God at all to care for us.'"[34]

On this topic, Luther seizes the opportunity to ridicule the "Sacramentarians" (most likely Zwingli and Oecolampadius) for their failure to understand the "contradiction" of Christ's presence both in the bread and wine and at the right hand of the Father.[35] Merely to conclude that the flesh is of no avail, as Zwingli did, is, for Luther, to rush into the Scriptures "with unwashed feet and following the blind judgment of reason."[36] Both the Law and "carnal wisdom" do not understand these mysteries, which are offensive to the fleshly minded. Indeed, all the works of God, for Luther, are in conflict with the promise of redemption, which nevertheless remains completely true and unshaken. What offends the

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[29] *AE* 4:93; *WA* 43:202.

[30] *AE* 4:95; *WA* 43:204.

[31] Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002): 443.

[32] *AE* 7:175; *WA* 44:429.

[33] *AE* 7:176; *WA* 44:429, 430.

[34] *AE* 6:360; *WA* 44:269.

[35] Kurt K. Hendel, *"Finitum Capax Infiniti:* Luther's Radical Incarnational Perspective," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 35 (December, 2008): 420–423.

[36] *AE* 4:95; *WA* 42:204.

human mind is the fact that the promise is invisible, delayed, and so often hidden in its opposite *(in contrarium posita)*.[37]

So great is the temptation to cast away all hope that it cannot be told in words, only experienced. It is not strange, therefore, that reason cannot provide a "positive counsel or conclusion" based on the evidence. Like the other reformers, Luther completely rejected the competence of human reason to lead us to the knowledge of God.[38] Rather, this is an arena in which the human spirit itself is fighting, and the Holy Spirit is present to help our weakness. Without that succor, we would quite easily be reduced to despair.[39]

Although deriving great pleasure from this game, God is not a cruel deity. Rather, this divine sport has a much deeper and lasting significance for both God and the saints. For Luther, God simulates anger and performs strange deeds in order to kill the mind of our flesh, which is opposed to God.[40] The Almighty disciplines us on account of that

> sluggishness and coldness of original sin, because of which the hearts of the godly are benumbed and rendered rather sluggish toward faith, hope, prayer, and other spiritual exercises. For when that game of God *[ludus ille divinus]* is lacking, we snore and are cold. Therefore, with this goad, as it were, God pricks and drives the stupid and lazy ass, our flesh, which oppresses us with its huge bulk.[41]

God does not want us to be conformed after the pattern of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Only then can we recognize the goodness of God, his acceptable and perfect will (Ro 12:2). Without this renewal, we cannot attain this knowledge. How then are we renewed? By rejecting and abolishing the "old man," Luther insists.[42]

For the reformer, it was the "papists" who believed that in this trial God was exacting satisfactions, as though he required this on account of our sins. Here, Luther refers to the "third step" of the medieval penitential system (contrition and confession being the first two) whereby the sinner underwent some form of punishment to make reparation to God for the

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[37] *AE* 4:326; *WA* 43:371.

[38] Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 77.

[39] *AE* 6:135; *WA* 44:100.

[40] *AE* 4:94; *WA* 43:203.

[41] *AE* 8:15; *WA* 44:590.

[42] *AE* 7:177; *WA* 44:430.

offense.[43] Yet, for Luther, there is no satisfaction for sins outside of Christ, except for that which occurs on the civil level and which has nothing to do with theology.

God afflicts us with disasters not to punish us, although it may appear to be identical to punishment, but to lead us to a deeper knowledge of our sin. God knows very well that we cannot make satisfaction of our own; the Almighty does not return evil according to our merits, although we deserve nothing less than death and hell. Here Luther deliberately employs such common terms as *satisfaction* and *merit,* applying them to the work of Christ and in direct opposition to their use in Roman doctrine.[44] Nevertheless, the sin that clings to our nature remains hidden from our eyes.[45] Therefore, God employs "powerful and bitter remedies" to make it manifest and to cleanse it. "If he is to sweep out evil," Luther remarks graphically, "he must take a broom and sharp sand, and he must scrub until blood flows." Such punishments and disasters as plagues, wars, and famines fall into this category as well, and the Lord makes use of them in order that sin may be revealed in us and that we understand "who we are in God's eyes." Often we must fall very far indeed in order that we may come to a knowledge of ourselves and our corruption.[46]

In Luther's mind, it is those who refuse to submit themselves in faith and obedience to the disciplining hand of the Father who worry endlessly about satisfactions, and when they find at last that these can never be enough (as the young Luther had), they are forced to despair. God also cleanses hypocrites and godless people, the reformer admits, but they are "broken like glass" before the game is ended.[47]

God desires that we consider the cause of our afflictions. Even if we are a paragon of good works, the flesh that we carry around with us remains impure, especially when we fail to comprehend the depth of our sinfulness. Certainly, all sins have been remitted and covered by the cross; yet they have not been completely removed from us. Those who are justified in Christ remain, in this life, *simul iustus et peccator.*[48] Thus for

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[43] *AE* 7:227&n; *WA* 44:468; Luther, *The Smalcald Articles,* in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evagelical Lutheran Church,* ed. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, Charles P. Arand (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 314.

[44] Watson, *Let Be God!, God* 120.

[45] Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther,* 141.

[46] *AE* 7:228; *WA* 44:468.

[47] *AE* 7:229; *WA* 44:469.

[48] Berhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development,* tr. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 263; James F. McCue, "*Simul iustus et*

Luther, it is as though God were saying to us, "'You have been enlightened and baptized; but you still stink, and your flesh is full of many great vices. Therefore, I might cleanse it, for that which is unclean and polluted shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.'" This is the merciful sport of God: that he afflicts us, not to destroy us, but so that we may arrive at an acknowledgement of our foulness and "cry to him invoking his mercy, which he shows so wonderfully."[49]

The "Sophists," that is, the medieval theologians or "Schoolmen" in whose teaching Luther had been trained, claimed that if one is "perfectly contrite" *(contritus perfecte)*, God then pours in his grace by "congruity" *(infundit gratiam de congruo)*. In effect, the reformer says, they desire to merit grace through punishment alone; they do not know what sin is.[50]

The "papists," Luther scolds, taught that original sin was removed in baptism, and that all that then remained was "tinder" *(fomes peccati)*. The medieval Summists had also declared the sacrament of penance to be, after baptism, *secunda post naufragium tabula* ("a second plank [of salvation] after shipwreck").[51] In a statement harkening back to his Ninety-five Theses, Luther cries out here that the whole life of the believer is one of repentance, not sacramental penance.[52] Satisfaction cannot be achieved through our merits and virtues, but through Christ's gift alone. The Christian life thus becomes a "purging out of the yeast" of sin; our own strength and satisfactions are useless. That Roman doctrine is a "sheer lie" for Luther. Rather we must see that we have been "received into grace through baptism for the remission of sins as well as for the purging of sin." This remission is a free gift and takes place through the sacrifice of Christ alone. Nevertheless, remission is accompanied by "distress, perplexity, tribulation, and mortification" throughout the life of the saint. "All these have a bearing on the abolition of sin," writes the reformer, "in such a way that it is not only remitted and forgiven by God's grace but is also purged away by the gift of the Holy Spirit."[53]

Original sin, Luther believes, was contracted in Paradise, and it clings to us until we are liberated through death. It is the "devil's yeast," and

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peccator in Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther: Toward Putting the Debate in Context," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48 (March, 1980): 93.

[49] *AE* 7:229, 230; *WA* 44:469.

[50] *AE* 7:230, 232; *WA* 44:470, 471.

[51] Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton Univeristy Press, 1977), 65.

[52] Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 353.

[53] *AE* 7:234–235; *WA* 44:473–74.

human nature is infected with it: "horrible darkness, ignorance, and aversion to God" are innate in us; our hearts and wills are full of "listlessness, smugness, and contempt for God."[54] The scholastics thought of sin in terms of violations of God's law in the human mind, speech, and actions, and in doing so, they failed to grasp the deep and radical nature of original sin *(peccatum radicale)*. For Luther, however, our inner nature itself is corrupted through the fall, so that what we do is merely an outward expression of who we are. In other words, we are already sinful before we do anything.[55] As he states emphatically in a 1522 sermon,

> Our deficiency does not lie in our works but in our nature. Our person, nature, and entire existence are corrupted through Adam's fall. Therefore not a single work can be good in us, until our nature and personal being are changed and renewed. The tree is not good; therefore the fruits are evil . . . [T]here is deficiency in the whole natural being . . . its birth and everything connected with its origin are corrupted and sinful. That is to say hereditary sin or natural sin or personal sin is the truly chief sin. If this sin did not exist, there would also be no actual sin. This sin is not committed, as are all other sins; rather it *is*. It lives and commits all sins and is the real essential sin *[die weßenlich sund]*, which does not sin for an hour or for a while; rather no matter where or how long a person lives, this sin is there too.[56]

We dream that we are pure and clean and without any filth at all. Thus, the "rod of discipline" is necessary in order to "correct and abolish" this folly of the heart.[57] As Luther phrases it, "We cannot be sanctified unless the flesh and the body of sin is mortified."[58]

As a parent cares for a child, the Lord acts just like a mother who does not put her baby in its cradle without first washing and cleansing it. The baby's wailing does not prevent her from washing it. "So we have been called; we have remission of sins; we are children and heirs of God, but laziness and the old filth of this body and soul still clings to us, and this plague God removes from us throughout our lives." Therefore, "violent troubles" are required in order to "cast off this sluggishness and sloth."[59]

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[54] *AE* 7:234; *WA* 44:472.

[55] Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 153.

[56] Luther, "The Gospel for New Year's Day, Luke 2[:21]," in *AE* 52:151–152; *WA* 10:i.1.508, 509.

[57] *AE* 7:233–234; *WA* 44:472.

[58] *AE* 6:152; *WA* 44:113.

[59] *AE* 7:234, 235; *WA* 44:473, 474.

For Luther, it is wisdom characteristic of a Christian to know that we are born in sin, that sin still "clings" to the flesh even up to the time of death, and that we cannot be perfectly freed from sin except through death. God is not a liar; rather, it is we who lie by our refusal to acknowledge our guilt. The Lord's correction and discipline, therefore, are not lies, but a revelation of our identity as sinners.[60]

In Ezek 24:6-7, the Lord refers to Jerusalem as a pot so thickly encrusted with rust that no amount of cleaning or scraping could suffice; it must be melted anew. "Its thick rust does not go out by fire"; it must be boiled and purified. Luther savors this image, for it vividly illustrates sin's deeply entrenched nature, God's hatred of sin, as well as the Almighty's parental concern. It is a "fatherly game" which God plays when he sends us plague, famine, disease, sadness of spirit, misfortune, and other evils that fill this life, all in order to melt and purge us. Such a savior as this the Jews were not expecting, Luther says, although it was written in Mal 3:2, "Who can endure the day of his coming?" Rather, they, like our own flesh, desired a messiah who would set them up as kings and lords over the whole earth.[61]

Although the patriarch himself does not see it, in God's eyes Jacob is weak in faith, with too light a grasp of the promise. Then the Almighty's face appears to him, and it is a fierce, gloomy, and murderous visage. If the patriarch trembles and does not understand, it is because the flesh stands in the way, for "it cannot endure its own mortification and so hinders the spirit from experiencing the boundless love and beneficence of God until the spirit emerges victorious from this warfare and repels these hindrances."[62]

Our flesh kicks and demands to have its way. Yet God does not act in agreement with our wishes when he governs according to his goodness and wisdom. It is God's nature not to give in to our blind petitions. At the time of his imprisonment in Egypt, Joseph desires to be set free and restored to his homeland. He prays for no more than this. Therefore, God allows him to "burn incense" for a while and to "send up odors." Then, the Lord lets him languish still longer, saying, "I still want more of those columns of ascending incense." Later, Joseph receives a much greater gift, one he had not understood or even hoped for.

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[60] *AE* 7:237, 238; *WA* 44:475, 476.
[61] *AE* 7:231; *WA* 44:470.
[62] *AE* 6:150; *WA* 44:112.

In the case of Jacob, if God had revealed to him that the loss of Joseph would result in a great blessing, the patriarch would have let the boy go with joy, but Jacob's flesh or "old man" would not have been mortified and his new man renewed with greater things.[63] In a more tragic way, Luther says, the Israelites murmured in the wilderness. God was prepared, able, and willing to give them help, but they demanded it immediately.[64]

In this discussion, the question must arise, "Is God a tempter?" For Luther, the Hebrew verb נסה ("to tempt"; used in the sense of testing in Gen 22:1, i.e. "God tested Abraham") must be taken seriously; it is not to be treated cursorily or lightly as, according to Luther, James does in his epistle (James 1:13). When God "tempts" Abraham, he leaves no hope, but confronts the patriarch with a blatant contradiction of the promise: Isaac, the child of promise, must die. The Lord, who was formerly Abraham's protector and benefactor, now shows himself in the guise of an enemy and tyrant.[65]

According to Luther, it is the devil who looks for such contradictions, hunts them down, and employs them against us. Yet Christians must recognize with fear and respect that it is God's practice to do contradictory things, while God's nature and promises remain immutable. Thus, one may employ such statements as "God is pretending, lying, simulating, and deceiving us," or "He says one thing but has something else in mind," for, especially in regard to death, this is indeed a very "salutary lie" *(id nobis salutare mendatium est)*.[66] The Almighty tests whether we are willing to give up present things and even life itself for God's sake as well as love God with our whole hearts. Luther explains that God is not deaf, nor is the Almighty's arm shortened; God is not only able but also ready to liberate and exalt the saints, except that for a time God hides himself in the shadows.[67]

Joseph plays a similar game with his brothers in Genesis 42–44, a sport that reduces them to fear and trains them in humility. For the reformer, this particular story is also an allegory, for in a similar manner, God conducts himself in his game with the saints. Joseph does not play or act so harshly out of revenge or hatred; indeed, he weeps, and his heart is deeply moved during this game. Yet he pretends that he is a tyrant who wants to

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[63] *AE* 6:354; *WA* 44:264.
[64] *AE* 6:353; *WA* 44:264.
[65] *AE* 4:92, 94; *WA* 43:201, 202.
[66] *AE* 4:131; *WA* 43:229.
[67] *AE* 7:177; *WA* 44:431.

destroy his brothers.[68] He acts as a stranger and upbraids them, threatening them with punishment and even death. Yet his true heart remains gentle and beneficent. Nothing is further from his mind than punishment; rather, his goal is to exalt and honor them, once they have been duly chastened.[69]

According to Luther, Jacob's wrestling with the "angel" in Genesis 32 is among the most obscure passages in the Old Testament, for it deals with the most "sublime temptation" in which Jacob has to fight, not with flesh and blood, but with God. The Lord acts in such a way toward Jacob that the patriarch does not recognize God but thinks it is an angel and an adversary who wishes to deprive him of the promise. Such serious games as these, says Luther, are becoming to God and befit his divine majesty.

We are "tempted" by God, not because the Lord desires this trial, but because in the midst of it, it is revealed whether we indeed love God above all others and whether we are able to bear God's darkness and taking away, just as we joyfully bear the kindness and promises.[70] In the same manner, Luther muses, a father may take an apple away from his son under some "pretense," not because he wants to deprive him of it, but merely to test whether his son loves him and believes that his father will give it back. If the son gives up the apple, the father is pleased with this obedience and expression of love. God's tempting is fatherly and, as James affirms, not for evil purposes or with the goal of producing hatred and fear, but for the exercise and stirring up of our faith and love. It is Satan who tempts for evil and attempts to draw us away into mistrust and blasphemy, but God honors and exalts those who wait for him and are able to bear the parental hand and rod.[71] Those who endure such trial come to a deeper understanding of God's mercy and providence. "O my heavenly Father," they exclaim, "were you so close to me, and I did not know it?" For Luther, this is what Scripture means by "seeing the Lord face to face": to be brought back from hell into reconfession and reaffirmation.[72]

Throughout his commentary on these Genesis texts, it is evident that the reformer, while defending God's providence, remains pastorally sympathetic to the pain occasioned by this divine game. To God, it is sport; but to us, it appears quite different. Such trials, he admits, cannot be overcome without much sorrow and grief, for "the saints are not blocks of wood and

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[68] *AE* 7:225; *WA* 44:466.
[69] *AE* 7:232; *WA* 44:471.
[70] *AE* 4:93; *WA* 43:202.
[71] *AE* 6:132; 7:174; *WA* 44:98, 428.
[72] *AE* 6:151; *WA* 44:112.

devoid of feeling; on the contrary they are human beings, and the emotions and affections implanted in human nature are present in them to a higher degree than they are in others."[73] As a human being and a saint accustomed to great trials, Luther confesses that there is nothing more agonizing than this mortification of the flesh and sin. "For this reason," he writes, "it seems horrible and impossible, and we shun and hate it. Nevertheless one must accustom oneself to it and make a beginning, in accordance with the example of Abraham, who does not shun it but waits for it with the utmost readiness."[74]

While this game gives God great pleasure, for us it is a "very sad death." "Reducing man to nothing," Luther cries, "giving him up to death, and afflicting him with disasters and troubles without number—this is not playing is it? It is a game of a cat with a mouse, and this is the death of the mouse."[75] Often our situation appears so hopeless and pathetic that the "spectators," that is, the angels, devils, and the world, suppose that we are surely doomed. Yet, for Luther, the Christian life is a divine *comedia*, in which the *catastrophe* (or denouement) unravels what has been true all along but hidden: that God has been playing with us in a most fatherly manner.[76]

Luther also employs the analogy of the common household in which the correction of the children is by no means a pleasant task. For the author, parental love demands "blows and stripes" in order that children may be improved, for one cannot bear to allow one's child to become a wastrel. Such love cannot be expressed without pain and grief on both sides.[77] Similarly, when Joseph chastens his brothers, love and compassion well up within him so that he is unable to fight back his tears, although by all outward appearances he seems as hard as flint and a cruel tyrant.[78] The game is likewise a hard and bitter one for his family.

It seems strange to our fleshly reason that we should suffer such temptations while the ungodly mass of humanity goes unchecked. Yet, God's purposes are eternal ones, and as the author of Hebrews states, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:11). Thus, for Luther, what a "sad and unhappy indulgence" is the

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[73] *AE* 4:112; *WA* 43:216.
[74] *AE* 4:123; *WA* 43:224.
[75] *AE* 7:225; *WA* 44:466.
[76] *AE* 7:225; *WA* 44:466; Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis*, 71.
[77] *AE* 7:232; *WA* 44:471.
[78] *AE* 7:231; *WA* 44:470.

prosperity of the wicked. They are far happier whom God delivers over to misery and death for the destruction of the flesh.[79] God, however, is the only one who sees this with any clarity and perfect confidence.

We may take comfort, however, in the fact that no time of tribulation and distress can be so great and so long as to break us or drive out the seed of faith that has been planted within us.[80] God is faithful and will not tempt us beyond what we are able to bear. Of course, Luther admits, such theodicy is easily undertaken as speculation; but practically, "[I]t is work and toil to be reduced in this way, to die, and to pass away into nothing so that nothing seems to be left either of life or of carnal feeling except the Word."[81]

In the Abraham story, we have two contradictory propositions: Isaac will be the father of a great nation; yet Abraham will apparently die childless. Such antithetical statements cannot be reconciled by any human reason or philosophy. It is the Word alone that can reconcile such a contradiction: Isaac, though dead, will live, and Isaac, though alive and full of promise, must die. For Luther, all the saints live and yet are dead on account of sin, and though they are dead, yet they live. In this paradox lies the heart of Scripture for the reformer, that which the sophists and rabbis cannot comprehend—namely, the resurrection of the dead, life, victory over death, and the destruction of sin.[82]

Based on the observable evidence, it is impossible to believe that God is able or even wants to destroy death and change it into life. Perhaps one may believe quite easily that death is sport for God, Luther admits. Yet to be convinced of this on a deeply personal level, that is, in regard to one's own death, is quite another matter, one that no "physician, philosopher, or lawyer" can achieve. For who can associate and reconcile these statements: death is not death; it is really life? "This is the power of faith," says Luther, "which mediates in this way between death and life and immortality, which as faith knows, has been bestowed through Christ.[83]

Despite the enormity of his trial, Abraham does not deny the promise; instead, he clings to it, believing that Isaac will yet bear descendents, though dead. Here, to drive home the point, the reformer pauses to remind his students that, only the day before, they had buried one of their own,

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[79] *AE* 6:356; *WA* 44:266.
[80] *AE* 7:177; *WA* 44:430.
[81] *AE* 6:361; *WA* 44:270.
[82] *AE* 4:113; *WA* 43:217.
[83] *AE* 4:116; *WA* 43:218, 219.

Dr. Sebald Münsterer, professor of law at Wittenberg, who, though dead, nevertheless lives.[84] According to Luther, through obedience Abraham understands the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, and through this doctrine alone he reconciles the apparent contradiction, which cannot be resolved in any other way.[85] He, therefore, is able to be instructed more deeply in the perfect will and wisdom of God. "By this deed, as though by some show," Luther comments,

> God wanted to point out that in his sight death is nothing but a sport and empty bugaboo of the human race, yes an annoyance and a trial, as for example, a father sports with his son, takes an apple away from him, and meanwhile is thinking of leaving him the entire inheritance. But this is difficult to believe; and for this reason, the heathen are without hope.[86]

Indeed, those who are without faith will despair, but Christians, who have the Word, should so meditate on it that however much they may be weighed down by the burden of sin and the hindrances of Satan they may be able to attain to "that glory of the knowledge of God's mind and so immortality," being able to affirm this immutable reality, namely, that death is sport *(mors est ludus)*.[87] Luther's words here become all the more poignant when we consider the physical afflictions he endured during these lectures, and how he believed his own death was drawing near as well.[88]

Although the "Sophists" may believe otherwise, faith is not an "idle quality" for Luther. On the contrary, it "reconciles opposites" *(conciliat contaria)*, has the power to "kill death, condemn hell, be sin for sin, and a devil for the devil with the result that death is no longer death, even if reason insists that death is present." Can this be anything less than a divine *ludus*?[89]

Luther confesses his own dullness in these matters, that his own understanding is imperfect. Reason for him is a donkey that remains at the foot of Mount Moriah and cannot ascend, and thus all who are not instructed in this doctrine of faith cannot help but remain "asses" and fail to grasp such a lofty concept, namely, that death is life. For if one still fears and trembles at the thought of death, one ought to confess ignorance and

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[84] *AE* 4:91n.

[85] *AE* 4:96; *WA* 43:204.

[86] *AE* 4:116; *WA* 43:119.

[87] *AE* 4:116, 117; *WA* 43:219.

[88] Walther von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: The Man and His Work*, tr. Lawrence W. Denef (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 377–378.

[89] *AE* 4:117; *WA* 43:219.

not boast of being a theologian.[90] The fact of death is plain to all, both to the godly and to the heathen. Yet, it is the special wisdom of the church that enables Christians to confess: "Though I kill my son, yet he will live and beget a nation, even if heaven itself should collapse around me, and though I die, yet will I live.[91] In his *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518) the reformer states emphatically:

> 19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened.
>
> 20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.[92]

Alister McGrath writes, "The 'theologian of glory' expects God to be revealed in strength, glory and majesty, and is simply unable to accept the scene of dereliction on the cross as the self-revelation of God." Nevertheless,

> God works in a paradoxical way *sub contrariis:* his strength lies hidden under apparent weakness; his wisdom under apparent folly . . . the future glory of the Christian under his present sufferings. It will therefore be clear that there is a radical discontinuity between the *empirically perceived situation* and the *situation as discerned by faith.*[93]

For the reformer, all of these paradoxical affirmations regarding life in spite of death have their source in the First Commandment, which also contains the doctrine of faith and the resurrection of the dead. "To be God," Luther maintains, "means to deliver from all evils that burden us, such as sin, hell, death, etc." The heathen know God solely as the Creator, but in the First Commandment "you will find Christ." The one who believes the First Commandment, "you shall have no other gods," will have no trouble or doubt about the resurrection of the dead.[94] Luther states in his discussion of this commandment in the *Large Catechism*:

> What more could you ask or desire than God's gracious promise that he will be yours with every blessing and will protect and help you in every need? The trouble is that the world does not believe this at all,

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[90] *AE* 4:118; *WA* 43:220.

[91] *AE* 4:118; *WA* 43:220.

[92] Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation (1518)," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 31.

[93] McGrath, *Luther's Theology*, 167.

[94] *AE* 4:119,121; *WA* 43:221, 222.

> and does not recognize it as God's Word. For the world sees that those who trust God and not mammon suffer grief and want and are opposed and attacked by the devil. They have neither money, prestige, nor honor, and can scarcely keep alive; meanwhile, those who serve mammon have power, prestige, honor, wealth, and every comfort in the eyes of the world. Accordingly, we must grasp these words, even in the face of this apparent contradiction, and learn that they neither lie nor deceive but will yet prove to be true.[95]

As Maxfield so well describes, these lectures were, for Luther, an opportunity to instill in his students a new evangelical worldview.[96] Thus the trials of the patriarchs are often viewed from the perspective of battles the reformer himself was fighting. Watson, too, points out that the Genesis lectures are, from one perspective, "largely an account of the conflict between true and false religion, the true and the false Church."[97] Because of persistent faith of the patriarchs, Luther considers Abraham to be "a true priest and bishop, more so than any ascetic with long robe and shaved head." The ascetics are no more holy than the prophets of Baal, for the true priests are those "who believe the word of God, who offer the sacrifice of praise and of the cross, and do not walk about in long garments but walk about in the gifts and jewels of the Holy Spirit: faith, patience in death, and the expectation of another and better life."[98] The patriarch knows in his heart that God's promises are not subject to change or neglect. Thus, he obeys God's command to sacrifice the lad, evaluating this new command in the light of God's previous promise concerning Isaac's seed.[99] Faith precedes, and the waiting follows.[100]

Yet if faith precedes patient suffering, for Luther the Word of promise must precede faith, for without the Word no obedience pleases God. A good work is that which is done in faith and in obedience by one who believes that God is the Creator, the Preserver, and the One who raises from the dead. The monks, priests of Baal, Turks, and Jews do not please God or walk in obedience, Luther says, for they have no authentically divine command to accompany their works. For instance, in 2 Kings 16, King Ahaz performs a "great work" by sacrificing his child, an act similar on some level to Abraham's. Yet Ahaz had no command to do such a

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[95] Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther*, tr. R.H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 14.

[96] Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis*, 2.

[97] Watson, *Let Be God!*, 183 n.94.

[98] *AE* 4:122; *WA* 43:223.

[99] *AE* 4:130; *WA* 43:229.

[100] *AE* 7:174; *WA* 44:428.

thing; on the contrary, God's command was the very opposite, and thus the king's sacrifice was an abomination. Obedience is based on faith, and faith does not exist apart from a divine promise.[101]

Luther exhorts his hearers not to demand a sign from God to confirm the promise, for the Lord has already given the church sufficient signs: baptism, Holy Communion, the Keys (the forgiveness of sin), and the ministry of the Word. For the reformer, these signs are equal to, or even surpass all the apparitions and visions given to the patriarchs. Compared with the signs given to the church, those offered to Abraham appear as mere "droplets and crumbs."[102] God's promise to the church has been made more than sufficiently manifest in the work of Christ, of which the above serve as adequate signs and confirmations.

Thus, the church must say with Job, "Though God slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15 AV), for God's actions contradict his promises, which we know and which have been fed to us.

> If [God] should cast me into the depths of hell and place me in the midst of devils, I would still believe that I would be saved because I have been baptized, I have been absolved, I have received the pledge of my salvation, the body and blood of the Lord in the Supper.[103]

The church has nothing with which to fight against such an *Anfechtung* but the "pure Word and the sacraments." These are few in comparison with so many foes, for the enemies of the church are without number, including civil authorities, scholars, popes, the devil, human flesh, and those within the church's own household.[104]

Therefore, let all human wisdom be reduced to nought, concludes the reformer, for we are created from the Word, and to the Word we must return.[105] It is the law that is linked with doubt:

> It [the Law] promises nothing but demands much. For this reason, wherever you find doubt in Holy Scriptures, you should refer it to the Law and say, "Here the Law is speaking." You must not doubt the promises. To doubt after prayer and confession is to sin against the

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[101] *AE* 4:123–124; *WA* 43:224.
[102] *AE* 4:126; *WA* 43:226.
[103] *AE* 6:131; *WA* 44:98.
[104] *AE* 6:147; *WA* 44:110.
[105] *AE* 6.361; *WA* 44:270.

> promises. Thus the promise of the gospel always battles against the doubt of the Law.[106]

Using the example of Jacob's bout with the angel, Luther maintains that God is "conquered" when faith does not leave off but presses on. Though exhausted beyond all human endurance, Jacob still grabs hold of his opponent and demands, "you must give me a retraction (that is, a blessing to counter the contradiction), or I will not let you go." So it is with the Canaanite woman in the Gospels, who cries out after Jesus to heal her demonized daughter. Curtly, she is told, "'You are a dog, and the bread of the children does not belong to you.'" Here, too, even Christ takes on the appearance of an enemy and sets his face against this petitioner. The woman does not buckle, however, but presses forward and opposes Christ's statement to his face. Only then does he soften and, removing the fierce mask *(larvam deponere)*, offers words of love, approval, and encouragement: "O woman, great is your faith!"[107]

W. D. J. Cargill Thompson writes, "In His dealings with man God is always 'Deus Absconditus'—'the hidden God'—who works behind the scenes, through 'masks' ('larvae') and whose actions are only known by his faithful."[108] In a 1517 sermon on Matthew 11:25, Luther states, "Man hides what he is in order to conceal it; God hides what he is in order to reveal it."[109] In the light of these scriptures and their examples of persistent faith, Luther advises his students:

> Even if [God] hides himself in a room in the house and does not want access to be given to anyone, do not draw back but follow. If he does not want to listen, knock at the door of the room; raise a shout! For this is the highest sacrifice, not to cease praying and seeking until we conquer him. He has already surrendered himself to us so that we may be certain of victory: ". . . he who believes and is baptized will be saved." These promises will never disappoint us unless we refuse to follow and seek.[110]

To say that God has surrendered himself is a reference to his self-revelation in his Word, which is filled with promises. Yet, through our

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[106]Luther, "Licentiate Examination of Heinrich Schemedenstede (1542)" in *Luther's Works*, ed. L.W. Spitz (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 34: 318; *WA* 39:II.200.

[107] *AE* 6:139-140; *WA* 44:103,104.

[108] W. D. J. Cargill Thompson, *The Political Thought of Martin Luther*, ed. Philip Broadhead (Totowa, NJ: Harvester Press, 1984), 49.

[109] McGrath, *Luther's Theology*, 167. "Homo abscondit sua ut neget, Deus abscondit sua ut revelet," *WA* 1:138.

[110] *AE* 6:140; *WA* 44:104.

own fault, through our sleeping and snoring, we fail to enter that arena of combat with God where these promises flourish. The angel, who for Luther is none other than the pre-incarnate Christ himself, "exercises" Jacob until true faith and firmness come to the fore. Reason attempts to conquer God, but its efforts are in vain. Rather, it is the constant and persistent seeker and petitioner who triumphs, and such a one, for Luther, offers the "sweetest sacrifice."[111]

These stories of strange events and hardships bear great value for the reformer, for he rejoices that through them the church in all ages may be comforted. In the Genesis texts, we see that the patriarchs were not senseless monoliths of perfection, as Luther saw monastic scholars as having imagined, but human flesh struggling against despair and doubt. Thus, when in tribulation, one should consider,

> I am not alone in being tempted concerning the wrath of God, predestination, and unbelief . . . all the saints as many as have ever believed or now believe in God's Son experience these struggles of temptation, by which either they themselves or the whole church are disciplined. For what is the whole assembly which is called the church? It is a tiny little flock of the most wretched, forlorn, and hopeless men in the sight of the world.[112]

If such trying experiences befell the holy patriarchs who were "full of the Holy Spirit," Luther asks, why then are we so shocked or why does murmuring arise in our hearts when we suffer similar temptations? Rather, we should "rejoice and give thanks to God when we feel ourselves tossed about by the same misfortunes by which God exercised the saintliest of men from the beginning."[113] Thus, Christians should mutually exhort one another to patient endurance by such examples as these left behind by those who went before us in the faith and who resembled us in suffering and bearing the cross. In fact, these examples appear very near to the course of our daily lives and misfortunes, and they touch us more intimately than the example of Christ himself, whose suffering and death inclines to appear "too sublime and without comparison" although certainly identical in its dynamics of abandonment and resurrection.[114]

In the histories of patriarchal hardship and trial, the church must learn to grasp its own reflection. For God,

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[111] *AE* 6:141; *WA* 44:105.
[112] *AE* 6:149; *WA* 44:111.
[113] *AE* 6:351; *WA* 44:262.
[114] *AE* 6:351; *WA* 44:262.

> hides the church and also our salvation under a dark and horrible cover, to which we must become accustomed so that we do not despair whenever adversities are thrown in our path by Satan, the world, or even God himself. The church is called "seditious, error ridden, heretical, the offscourings of the very worst men who have ever lived."[115]

Here, the reformer alludes to the persecutions and slanders against evangelicals in his own day.[116]

It is important to remind ourselves that the Genesis commentary was first addressed in a lecture hall to theological students, many of whom would themselves become pastors.[117] Luther, therefore, concerns himself here in a very practical way, as he does so often in his works, with comforting despairing consciences.[118] As George Kraus notes, the assurance of salvation is for Luther the "bedrock for pastoral ministry" and "crucial to healthy soul care."[119] For the reformer, these biblical stories contain much power when used correctly in pastoral care. As he states in his comments on Genesis 32:

> These matters must be dealt with carefully for the sake of those who will be future pastors of the churches, for there will always be some who will suffer these temptations and will need to be cheered by the pastor's consolation: "You have been baptized, fed with the Lord's supper, and absolved with the laying on of hands, not mine but God's, who has said to you, 'I forgive your sins and promise you eternal life.'"[120]

It is clear from this counsel that Luther exhorts Christians to stand upon those promises that they have already been given and not to allow the "staff of the promise" to be so easily knocked from their hands. What is the promise for the Christian but that of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, and what is the evidence of this promise but baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Word of God? Therefore, when tempted with contradictions and despair, the godly have this recourse:

> I know that I am baptized and that God, for the sake of his Son, has promised me grace. This promise will not lie, even if I should be cast into utter darkness. Therefore, what Satan suggests to me is not God's

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[115] *AE* 6:147; *WA* 44:110.

[116] Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis*, 9.

[117] Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis*, 1–3.

[118] McCue, "*Simul iustus et peccator*," 92.

[119] George Kraus, "Luther the *Seelsorger*," *CTQ* 48 (1984): 154.

[120] *AE* 6:132; *WA* 44:98.

> will: but God is tempting me in this manner, that it may become manifest what is hidden in my heart. It is not that God does not know this but that I do not know it. He himself wants to make use of this occasion to crush the head of the serpent in me. For . . . the mind of the flesh is enmity against God.[121]

As Heino Kadai states, Luther's "pastoral counsel was almost always a practical application of *theologia crucis.*"[122]

One must cling to the fact that God's promises are immutable. For Luther, the Word of God cannot be without effect; it is powerful, active, and creative. What it says, it performs. Thus, when we obey God's command and believe the promises, the outcome, which is already determined, follows eventually but surely, even though "the very gates of hell fight against it."[123] "One must hold fast to this comfort," Luther exhorts, "that what God has once declared, this he does not change. If a person has been baptized, and thus has been given the promise of the kingdom, he has received God's unchangeable Word and should not allow himself to be drawn away from it."[124]

Once a person is convinced in his heart of God's truthfulness, he proceeds with confidence and boldness, not being anxious about the "possible or impossible, the easy or difficult." As Paul declares in Romans 8:39, "nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." Gideon and Samson are such examples for Luther: in receiving the Word of God, they believed, not fearing the size of the enemy. It is this kind of faith that produces marvelous works, as Christ affirms: "He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do" (John 14:12).[125]

According to the reformer, such "greater works" were not witnessed in his day because Christians lacked a sufficient understanding of such faith matters, but were fast asleep, failing to believe God whether he was disciplining or promising. At the time of his lecture on Genesis 22, (October, 1539) for example, an epidemic had broken out and caused panic. Luther bemoans this weakness of faith: "It is as though we did not have the command to live and to call upon God. . . . The bishops and pastors remain silent like dumb dogs and do not believe that they are what

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[121] *AE* 4:95; *WA* 43:203.
[122] Kadai, "Luther's Theology," 202.
[123] *AE* 4:103; *WA* 43:209.
[124] *AE* 4:96; *WA* 43:204.
[125] *AE* 4:104; *WA* 43:210.

they are." "Wait for the Lord" is the counsel of the psalmist (Ps 27:14), but in Luther's opinion, no one heeds this advice, for no one believes that "God has commanded confidence and condemned despair." One does not need to search for this confidence in the ends of the earth, for the everyday lives of each of us are filled with the commands of God. Yet we do not believe and therefore feel no joy, since we lack that "light and understanding with regard to that spiritual pride and confidence that is based on God's Word." Thus, the reformer counsels, the example of the patriarchs should be all the more exalted and painstakingly taught.[126]

This doctrine, for Luther, must not only be dealt with on a theoretical level in the pastor's study and hammered home from the pulpit, but also practiced wholeheartedly in our daily lives. The person who wishes to be a Christian must meditate on these things carefully and commit them to memory. "The marvelous counsels of God in governing his saints must be learned," he advises,

> and the hearts of the godly must become accustomed to them. When you have a promise of God, it will happen that the more you are loved by God, the more you will have it hidden, delayed, and turned into its opposite. For if God did not love you so exceedingly, he would not play with you in this manner. . . . These are the sure signs of a heart that is fatherly and burns with love for you. . . . He does this because he loves his son very much and wants to give richly, provided that his son perseveres and swallows and overcomes the delay. . . . But we grumble and are displeased at a delay, no matter how short it is. What is being promised we want to get either now or in another manner and in another way. . . . Therefore, the examples of the fathers teach us what the true forms of worship are, namely, genuine faith, perfect hope, and unwavering love. These virtues lead us to the realization that God is present and beneficent no matter how he seems to be against us.[127]

The lesson to be learned and practiced is knowing how to be abased and how to abound, to be not only patient and hopeful in tribulation but also humble and thankful in prosperity. This is truly the "royal road" *(regia via)* for the Christian, and when we have locked these things away in our heart, we will not only bear adversity with patience but even long for God to try us in this manner so that the vestiges of the old man might be abolished in us.[128] It is important to note, however, that not all the saints

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[126] *AE* 4:105, 106; *WA* 43:211.

[127] *AE* 4:326–327; *WA* 43:371.

[128] *AE* 2:370; 7:237; *WA* 42:527; 44:475.

will grasp these concepts so clearly, but they are not rejected by God for this reason.[129]

It must also be clarified that, for Luther, a faithful grasp on the promise does not mean that the saint is free from temptation. On the contrary, such thoughts must occur. Jacob, for example, thinks that God may have changed his mind and rejected him. These were the patriarch's thoughts; yet they remained thoughts and not assurances, "axioms," or "conclusions." Our human nature and weak faith cannot prevent such doubts from assailing us, but faith is able to deflect these fiery darts and prevent them from starting a conflagration. Luther quotes a certain hermit who gives this advice in the *Vitae Patrum*: "You cannot prevent the birds from flying over your head. But let these only fly and do not let them build nests in the hair of your head." Foolish people like Saul and Judas make conclusions out of such thoughts, throwing away both the Word of faith and prayer with both hands. Such a response makes "judicial sentences" out of temptations.[130] The saint, however, must make an exerted effort of faith and take even greater comfort whenever God's promises are expressed in their opposite. On this subject, Luther offers the following pastoral proverbs:

> 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 suppose that someone has been deserted and rejected by God, then we should conclude that he is in the embrace and the lap of God.[131]

For this is what Paul means by that basic Christian paradox: "When I am weak, then I am strong."

In Luther's *Lectures on Genesis,* we see in concrete and everyday terms how God exercises, exalts, and plays with the saints: that disasters, groans, tears, death, and tribulations of all sorts are but "a most pleasant and beautiful game of God's goodness" *(iucundissimum et pulcherimum ludum quendam divinae bonitatis).*[132] Such a game as that of the father and the child's apple appears harmless on a domestic level, but in the arena of faith, when we struggle between contradictions on the one hand and the promises of God on the other, this is indeed a very arduous exercise. The patriarchs, like us, had to struggle not only against human opposition,

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[129] *AE* 6:131; *WA* 44:97.
[130] *AE* 6:133, 134; *WA* 44:99
[131] *AE* 6:149; *WA* 44:111.
[132] *AE* 7:226; *WA* 44:467.

danger, and the threat of death, but more importantly, and excruciatingly, against temptation in the "highest degree": that dual to the death, not against flesh and blood, but against God himself in hostile guise.

To the flesh, this game seems a most cruel, dark, and tyrannical will. Yet, although we appear to teeter on the brink of destruction, we must take courage and cling tightly to the promises, for when we groan, God is "smiling most kindly, taking pleasure in those who fear him and hope in his mercy." In the end, it is revealed that this "quite childish playing" *(lusus prorsus puerili)* is "not wrath but discipline, not disinheritance but purgation. It is excellent and very salutary exercise and perfect instruction."[133] For it is necessary for our salvation that original sin, which, though covered over by the cross, nevertheless still clings to us, be removed throughout our lifetime, and that our flesh, senses, reason, and wisdom be put to death, so that we may trust without seeing, but with great "simplicity and with eyes shut, even though [God] pretends not to care for us."[134]

It is necessary that the flesh be mortified and the Spirit quickened within us, for according to the flesh we are being put to death, and according to the spirit we are being made alive. As Paul affirms, "Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day" (2 Cor 4:16). This dynamic, for Luther is the "continuous teaching of the entire Holy Scripture and also God's will."[135] Thus, we may declare with the psalmist, "It is good for me that thou didst humble me that I might learn thy statutes" (Ps 119:71), and so, like a contrite child, kiss the rod of discipline.[136]

In commenting upon these texts, Luther's concern is not only theological and pastoral but also highly personal. He himself is certainly no stranger to such attacks and struggles of faith, and so is sympathetic toward the groans and doubts of the flesh.[137] For Luther, what one must impress upon those who are afflicted is the very sure evidence that they have not been abandoned, that God does not hate them, and that "what they interpret as desertion is acceptance and the surest proof of God's grace." For the Lord "chastises every child whom he receives" (Heb 12:6),

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[133] AE 6:130, 131; *WA* 44:97.
[134] *AE* 6:359; *WA* 44:268.
[135] *AE* 6:355; *WA* 44:265.
[136] *AE* 6:152; *WA* 44:113.
[137] *AE* 6:148; *WA* 44:110.

so that the saints may not be swallowed up by that blindness to sin and aversion to all things godly, that characterize their original nature.[138]

It is precisely at this point that the stories of patriarchal trials are of such great edification and comfort for Luther. As he remarks concerning Jacob's wrestling with God:

> This is a useful and good allegory, instructing and confirming consciences, which should always be put to use and kept before one's eyes so that we may conclude that the believer conquers God by his faith and prayer, because God has promised that he will be his Defender and Savior and the Giver of all blessings. Therefore he is not willing to deny himself and cannot do so. But if he appears in another form or in another capacity and seems to be adverse to you, you should not be disturbed in heart, nor should you yield, but in faith you should offer resistance so that you may conquer and become Israel. How? Not with the strength or weapons of your flesh and nature but with confidence in the cause that intervenes between you and God, namely, that he has promised and sworn that he will be your God. With this confidence you will conquer, inasmuch as it arises not from Nature but from the promise. If, therefore, he meets you as a wrestler and wants to destroy you or to hide his name and promise, be strong and hold firmly to the Word, even though you feel great infirmity, and you will conquer. Then in that fight you will also feel that the sinew, or joint, of the thigh [i.e., the flesh] is moved from its place and is becoming weak.[139]

In this counsel the saints may find consolation, concluding that all things take place for our salvation according to the Father's very definite plan, for such is God's government and perfect providence.

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[138] *AE* 7:235; *WA* 44:474.

[139] *AE* 6:154; *WA* 44:115.