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For the Life of the World

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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.

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Luther and Walther: Receivers of



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

It is all too easy for us to hear names like Martin Luther or C.F.W. Walther and treat them as heroes, men who were almost superhuman in what they were able to accomplish in this life. We can lift them up on a pedestal and think, “If only I had as strong a faith and willpower as they did! Then I wouldn’t have all these problems. Then I wouldn’t feel down all the time. Then I wouldn’t doubt whether God actually loves me.” We all have these feelings, looking up to other people and believing that they don’t deal with real problems like ours.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. 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

Grace

Todd A. Peperkorn

of others to bring them up out of the pit of despair. Let's take a look at an episode in each of their lives to see how God used others to lift them up.

When Martin Luther (1483–1546) was about 44 years old, he had what appears to be a physical and mental breakdown. The year was 1527, ten years after the posting of the 95 Theses. The Reformation was in full swing at that time, and it would be in the next couple years that Luther would pen what might be his most important works, namely, the Small and Large Catechisms. But in 1527, Luther (and most of his friends) believed he was going to die. It was a combination of physical, mental, and spiritual exhaustion, and it happened at the time when the plague forced the Wittenberg faculty to move to Jena. Today, we might look at these symptoms and presume that it was something akin to clinical depression. Whether that is the case or not is impossible to tell today. What matters for our purpose is that it was Johannes Bugenhagen Pomeranus who brought spiritual care to Luther's malaise.

The best treatise on this episode is by Martin Lohrmann and is entitled, "Bugenhagen's Pastoral Care of Martin Luther." Lohrmann recounts that both Bugenhagen and Justus Jonas (dean of the theological faculty at Wittenberg) cared for Luther during this time, watching over his spiritual needs while also caring for his body. Luther feared for his family, that they would be destitute upon his death. Luther also feared that he was really the source of all of the sectarianism that was on the rise throughout Christendom at the time.

Throughout these trials, Bugenhagen sought to draw Luther into the Scriptures themselves, to see his own life as an echo of the lives of the saints who had gone

before. The suffering we undergo in this life points to the suffering and death of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Lohrmann writes,

As presumptuous as it may sound to compare Luther to Hannah, Job, Paul, or John, these biblical references ultimately point not to Luther but to faith in the liberating God of the Bible. In this sense, these biblical verses from Luther's sickbed serve as both private pastoral care and also public proclamation of the gospel to all who suffer or mourn.²

At another time, Bugenhagen wrote of how strange it was to have the student become the pastor to his own mentor. He wrote:

I was about to go, but I wanted to know before I left, "Why did you call for me?" He replied, "It's nothing bad." But from there we went upstairs privately to the bedroom, and he commended all that was his to God and confessed his sin. Now the teacher was asking the student for words of God's consolation and forgiveness of sins from Holy Scripture and suggesting that I pray for him.³

At the end of the day, what Luther needed was a pastor to speak to him the very words of the Gospel that Luther himself had taught and preached for so many years.

In 1860, at 49 years old, C.F.W. Walther had a similar mental breakdown to Luther. It was 13 years after the founding of what we know today as The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Walther was the President of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and the Pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Congregation

in St. Louis. He had stepped down as president of the Synod at the time, but it was not enough.

In a letter to Walther's congregation, we read about how Walther was doing and what happened to bring him back to health.⁴ Walther wrote of his own distress in this way:

I may and must now reveal to you that the last half of the previous year has been one of the most difficult times of my life. I was physically incapable of attending to even half the office that I am dignified to carry out among you in unworthy fashion. Even more, the prospect that I would again be capable of the same became gloomier and darker month by month. I owe it to you to be transparent. I was tormented night and day by the

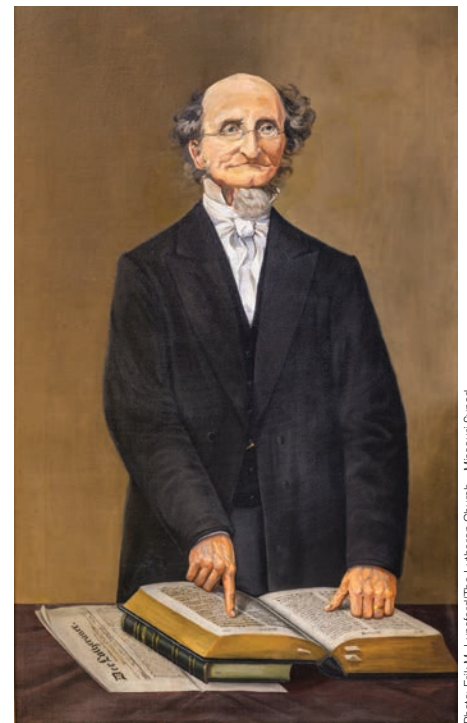


Photo: Erik M. Lunsford/The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod



In what seemed the darkest moments of their lives, both Luther and Walther were lifted up by their own pastors and congregations. God uses people to care for His world, and that includes His under-shepherds.

thought that through my fault in many different ways, our congregation would withdraw with quick strides from the path of the first love and simplicity. And more than that, my own relationship with my God and Lord filled me with deep aversion and vexation. God placed before me, as never before, my entire past. He let me see my misery as I had never seen it before. I was filled with misery and distress. It appeared to me as though God had cast me away from His countenance. It seemed as though He regarded me as a rejected instrument, as if I were not a worker but a stumbling stone in His vineyard, which He must finally cast aside.⁵

Again, like Luther, it is impossible to truly apply a medical diagnosis to someone from the past. But Walther’s words of self-doubt and torment sound all too familiar to those who suffer from clinical depression. How could God actually save such a wretch? What was it that started to turn things around for Walther? He continues, “It was the flood of words of consolation and acts of brotherly love and care that fourteen days ago began to flow over me. These kindnesses irresistibly moved my weakened heart . . . you are the ones whose words and deeds have raised me up from the ashes in which I sat deeply afflicted.”


When Walther was in need, it was his own congregation that stepped up, cared for him, and even paid his way for a sabbatical in Germany. It does not take much to recognize that they saved his ministry and possibly his life.

This has been a short glimpse into these two episodes, but they are instructive. What can we learn from these two times which were so similar in many ways? In the words of one of my own spiritual fathers, “every pastor needs a pastor.” In what seemed the darkest moments of their lives, both Luther and Walther were lifted up by their own

pastors and congregations. God uses people to care for His world, and that includes His under-shepherds.

How do we live and teach this today in our congregations and in our lives? Here are a few ideas:

- ✘ Learn to think of times of rest as sacred time that God gives for health and restoration. Pastors, don’t let your own sense of responsibility push out that needed time! And congregation members, help your pastor to take the time off that he needs.
- ✘ Start seeing the relationship between receiving mercy and giving mercy to others. I can’t truly give unless I have first received. This is true for spiritual care, but it is also true for physical and emotional care.
- ✘ Don’t underestimate the power of God’s Word to comfort and enliven us. With both Luther and Walther, it was the words of consolation given to them in their time of need that gave hope.

May our churches ever be places of hope and consolation, both for our people and for our pastors. 

1 *Ibid.*, 129

2 *Ibid.*, 129.

3 As cited in Lohrmann, 131.

4 From *At Home in the House of My Fathers* (CPH, 2009), 142–145. Translated by Matthew C. Harrison.

5 *Ibid.*, 143.

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Scan the code to learn more about Dr. Peperkorn’s book, *I Trust When Dark My Road: A Lutheran View of Depression.*

