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ANSWERING THE “WHY” QUESTION: MARTIN LUTHER ON HUMAN SUFFERING AND GOD’S MERCY

by John T. Pless

Why?

THE 13TH ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11 and a string of events within the last decade — including tsunamis; Hurricane Katrina; earthquakes in Haiti, Chile and Japan; flooding in the Philippines; mindless shootings in a Connecticut school; tornadoes in the American Midwest; grisly persecution of Christians in Syria and the Ebola epidemic in West Africa — are compounded with countless personal tragedies that press people to ask the ancient question, “Why is there suffering?” More existentially put, “What did I do to deserve this?”

These are questions raised to Christians, and before them we cannot remain silent. In venturing into this territory, we do well to heed the counsel of D. Z. Philips:

Philosophizing about the problem of evil has become common place. Theories, theodices abound, all seeking either to render unintelligible, or to justify, God’s ways to human beings. Such writing should be done in fear: fear that in our philosophizing, we will betray the evils people have suffered, and, in that way, sin against them. Betrayal occurs every time explanations and justifications of evil which are simplistic, insensitive, incredible or obscene. Greater damage is often done to religion by those who think of themselves as its philosophical friends than by those who present themselves as religion’s detractors and despisers. Nowhere is this damage more than in evidence, in

my opinion, than in philosophical discussions of the problem of evil.¹

Martin Luther was not a stranger to suffering and affliction.² It is the thesis of this paper that the Reformer does have a good bit to teach us both about what we are authorized by the Word of God to say and how we, who live under the cross of Jesus Christ, respond to those who suffer in this world. But I would like to come to Luther by first attending to alternative responses.

Theodicy: Justification of God or man?

In 1981, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a best-selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.³ The book is an anguish-laden attempt of the rabbi to come to terms with a painful illness that claimed the life of his young son. Struggling with issues of God’s providence and mercy, creation and chaos, the rabbi

can finally only conclude that those who suffer must “forgive God.” Believing that God’s intentions might be good but His power is limited seems to be a better solution than

“But who can supply the reason for the things that he sees the Divine Majesty has permitted to happen? Why do we not rather learn with Job that God cannot be called to account and cannot be compelled to give us the reason for everything He does or permits to happen?”

— LUTHER ON GENESIS 3:1, IN LUTHER’S WORKS, VOLUME I, P. 144

¹ D. Z. Philips, *The Problem of Evil & the Problem of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), xi. Also see Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

² Here see the fine study by Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 84–124 and John T. Pless, *Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross—A Study of Luther’s Pastoral Theology* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013).

³ See Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon, 1981).

When suffering and tragedy occur, Luther warns against the tendency to judge God or to presume His intentions. Rather, the Reformer encourages trust in Him and patient endurance in this sinful, fallen, temporal world, faithfully awaiting the coming of Jesus Christ.

calling into question His goodness. Thomas G. Long sensitively examines but finds wanting the approach of Rabbi Kushner, noting:

Process theologians like Kushner want to draw an emphatic picture of God, but they end up producing merely a pathetic one, a God one might find endearing, but not worthy of worship. Here is God in the midst of chaos, whispering, pleading, trying to persuade a balky world to be better, to be less trivial and more aesthetically pleasing, but the results are less impressive.⁴

In addressing the question of evil and suffering, three things must be held together: (1) God's merciful love, (2) His omnipotence and (3) the far-reaching consequences of human sin in and on creation. Kushner seeks to rescue God's reputation as a God of love by sacrificing His omnipotence.

If a Lutheran were to do a re-write of Kushner's book, it would have a different title: *When Good Things Happen to Bad People*. In the Divine Service, we confess that "We justly deserve" God's "present and eternal punishment," but times of calamity call into question whether we really believe it. In defiance or moaning resignation, we cry out "Why me?" as though God had to explain Himself.⁵ In this role reversal, God becomes the defendant and man the judge.

Theodicy is a term coined from two Greek words *theos* (God) and *dike* (judgment) literally meaning a judgment of or justification of God. The term became the title of a book by G. W. Leibnitz (1646–1716) in which he argued optimistically that this is the best of all possible worlds. After the destructive All Saints Day earthquake of 1755 killed thousands in Lisbon, his argument was ridiculed, but the term would remain. Its use would indicate something of a reversal. Werner Elert writes that, "We try to ensnare God in our moral categories, and we do it with the best of intentions, because we wish to rationalize our assertion that he is just and kind."⁶ But as Elert goes on to explain, there is a reversal going on. The Creator, who is the judge, now becomes the defendant, while the creature now becomes judge over the Creator. Rather than God

justifying man, man now attempts to justify God.

Recent attempts at theodicy often attempt to excuse God. After the tsunami, one North American clergyman when interviewed on a national television broadcast claimed "that God had nothing to do with it." In a futile effort to protect the Lord God from anything that might cause human beings to fear Him, this cleric tried to extract God from the picture altogether! The attempt falters, leaving a God who is remodeled according to human imagination. This is hardly the God known by Job and Jonah in the Old Testament.

Others would suggest that God is not the cause of suffering, but He merely allows it. If God is almighty, then it is of little comfort to assert that this all-powerful God allowed evil when He could have stopped it. To this argument, Oswald Bayer responds:

The first attempt is an effort to soften or give up completely on the concept of omnipotence. It is thus often said that God does not cause evil, but simply lets it happen. But such talk about the bland 'permitting' (*permissio*) of evil is too harmless. It assumes the possibility of a power vacuum or even that there is an independent power that is in opposition. At the very least, it assumes that the human being has the power to stand up against God.⁷

But God is not impotent. He is "God the Father Almighty maker of heaven and earth" as we confess in the creed. Attempts to get God off the hook, to defend Him by limiting or weakening His omnipotence end up with an idol.

Listening to Jesus

Rather than try to construct a philosophical theodicy that would assign human beings the impossible task of justifying God, we do better to listen to Jesus, as He responds to the "why" question in Luke 13:1–9. Whether it is Pilate's slaughter of the pious as he mingles their blood with the blood of sacrificial animals, the engineering failure of the Tower of Siloam or more contemporary examples of seemingly unjust suffering, such stories prompt us also to inquire of God, "Why?" Yet the words of Jesus pre-empt the question with a stark warning: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3).

Jesus does not offer a philosophical explanation for the

⁴ Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*, 75.

⁵ In fact, Gerhard Forde writes, "The attempt to make God answerable to the likes of us – that is the original sin itself." Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther versus Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 64.

⁶ Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos*. Trans. Carl J. Schindler (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 156.

⁷ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*. Trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008): 206–207. Also see Oswald Bayer, "God's Omnipotence" *Lutheran Quarterly* (Spring 2009), 85–102.

religious massacre in the temple or the random toppling of Siloam's tower upon the heads of 18 innocent bystanders. The Lord wastes no time with theoretical distinctions between the malicious banality of the butchery done by the human will of Pilate and catastrophic collapse of stone and mortar. Jesus' words will not let us go there. His words call for repentance, not speculation.⁸

Repentance lets go of the silly questions that we would use to hold on to life on our own terms, to try to protect ourselves against the God who kills and makes alive. The theologian Oswald Bayer observes that the world is forensically structured, arranged in such a way as to demand justification. We find evidence of this, Bayer says, in the way we defend our own words and deeds.⁹ What happens when we are confronted with wrongdoing? We attempt to justify our behavior. It is a rerun of Eden: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me of fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12) Adam blames Eve. But behind his accusation of Eve is the accusation of his Creator. To repent is to die to self-justification and turn to the God who justifies the ungodly by faith alone. He is the God who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but instead has sent forth His own Son to pour out His blood in atonement for the world's sin, to be crushed by the weight of God's wrath that in His righteousness sinners

⁸ Gerhard Forde asserts, "I heard a rabbi in one of the memorial ceremonies for the destruction of the two World Trade Towers declaim that nothing or no one could convince us that God somehow willed the terrible tragedy with all its attendant suffering and loss of life. But the problem is that such declamations, alas, do not hold. When all is said and done, the pain and sorrow and mourning continue...All such declamations accomplish is to throttle the preaching of the gospel. They substitute lame explanations and shallow comfort where there should be proclamation." Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 44–45.

⁹ Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1–8.

might not perish but have life in His name.

Speculation or faith: God in hiding or God revealed?

Speculation, it seems, is more comfortable than repentance and less risky, we imagine, than faith in a God who kills and makes alive. But speculation cannot penetrate God in His absolute hiddenness; it ultimately yields no answers. In providing pastoral care to folk vexed by questions concerning predestination, Luther directs us away from God in His hiddenness. This is precisely where the "why" questions lead. Instead, Luther points to God's mercy revealed in the manger and the cross, coming at God from below. The table talk recorded by Caspar Heydenreich, Feb. 18, 1542, sets forth Luther's response to those who use the doctrine of election for speculation rather than faith. Luther warns against an "epicurean" approach that is nothing more than fatalism. Such a fatalistic approach casts aside the Passion of Christ and the Sacraments. It is the work of the devil to make us unbelieving

Rather than try to construct a philosophical theodicy that would assign human beings the impossible task of justifying God, we do better to listen to Jesus, as He responds to the "why" question in Luke 13:1–9. Whether it is Pilate's slaughter of the pious as he mingles their blood with the blood of sacrificial animals, the engineering failure of the Tower of Siloam or more contemporary examples of seemingly unjust suffering, such stories prompt us also to inquire of God, "Why?" Yet the words of Jesus pre-empt the question with a stark warning: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3).

and doubtful. It would be foolish of God to give us His Son and the Scriptures if he wished us to be uncertain or doubtful of salvation.

God is truthful, and His truth gives us certainty. A distinction must be made, Luther asserts, between the knowledge of God and the despair of God. We know nothing of the unrevealed God, the hidden God. God blocks the path here. "We must confess that what is beyond our comprehension is nothing for us to bother about."¹⁰ We are to stick with the revealed God. "He who inquires into the majesty of God shall be crushed by it."¹¹ God gives us His Son so that we may know that we are saved. Hence

¹⁰ Theodore Tappert, ed., *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, nd), 132.

¹¹ Tappert, 132.

we are “to begin at the bottom with the incarnate Son and with your terrible original sin.”¹² We are to stick with Baptism and the preaching of God’s Word.

Turning to his own experience, Luther recalls the consolation he received from Staupitz when vexed by the question of election. Staupitz directed him to the wounds of Christ wherein we have the mercy of God revealed; God is surely there for us. The example of Adam and Eve is a warning against every attempt to find God apart from His Word, for such an endeavor is more than spiritually frustrated; it ends in unbelief, for God wraps Himself in His promises of mercy and grace, and He will not let sinners access Himself in places other than His Gospel:

Without the Word there is neither faith nor understanding. This is the invisible God. The path is blocked here. Such was the answer which the apostles received when they asked Christ when he would restore the kingdom to Israel, for Christ said, ‘It is not for you to know.’ Here God desires to be inscrutable and to remain incomprehensible.¹³

Apart from the baby of Bethlehem who goes on to suffer and die as the man of Calvary, God remains an evasive presence whose ways are inexplicable and whose power is condemnation.

No comfort is to be found in the “hidden God” (*deus absconditus*) but only in the “revealed God” (*deus revelatus*) that is in Christ.¹⁴ Hence, theology and pastoral care begin below at manger and cross and not above in the majesty that terrifies.

Paul ... desires to teach Christian theology, which does not begin above in the utmost heights, but below in the profoundest depths ... If you are concerned with your salvation, forget all ideas of law, all philosophical doctrines, and hasten to the crib and his mother’s bosom and see him, an infant, a growing child, a dying man. Then you will be able to escape all fear and errors. This vision will keep you on the right way. He (Luther) says the same in the briefest possible formula: “To seek God outside of Jesus is the Devil.”¹⁵

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ On God’s hiddenness, see the excellent treatment by Steven Paulson, “Luther’s Doctrine of God” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, Lubomir Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 187–200.

¹⁵ Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to his Thought*, trans. R.A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 235.

We are given only to hear the “preached God,” the *Deus revelatus* as Luther puts it in *The Bondage of the Will*:

The God who is preached and revealed to us, who gives himself to us and is worshipped by us, differs from the unpreached, unrevealed, not given, not worshipped God ... The preached God purifies us from sin and death, so that we become holy. He sends his son to heal us. The God hidden in his majesty, however, does not weep bitterly over death and does not abolish it, rather this hidden God effects life, death, and everything in between. As such he has not become restrained in his Word; rather he has reserved for himself freedom above everything else.¹⁶

Divine mercy in word and deed

Unexplainable tragedies bring pain and chaos. God leaves the wound open to use the words of Bayer.¹⁷ We cry out to God in lamentation in the face of events that defy our capacities for understanding. But the anguished lament ascends from the crucible of faith, not unbelief. It is a confession of trust in the God who works all things for the good of those who called (Rom. 8:28). Living in repentance and faith, we are freed from the inward turn of speculation that seeks to investigate the hidden God and instead we trust in the kindness and mercy of God revealed in Christ Jesus. With such a freedom we are liberated to rely on God’s promises and turn our attention to works of mercy to bring compassion and relief to those who suffer in this sinful world.

What is the nature and shape of this mercy? Mercy is the Lord’s compassionate action toward sinful human beings in that He does not leave us alone with our sin, forsaking us to death and condemnation, but instead rescues us by His death and resurrection to live with Him.

¹⁶ Cited from LW 33:319 by Notger Slenczka, “God and Evil: Martin Luther’s Teaching on Temporal Authority and the Two Realms” *Lutheran Quarterly* XXVI (Spring 2012), 19–20. Commenting on this Luther text, Slenczka says “The way God works in the rubble of history might as well be called fate; either way, no person will ever understand the motives and intentions of the force which drives history” (20). In history the works of God remain “opaque” (21) as they are hidden to human beings. Compare with Werner Elert’s discussion of “fate” in *An Outline of Christian Doctrine*, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1927), 33–36.

¹⁷ Oswald Bayer, “Poetological Doctrine of the Trinity” *Lutheran Quarterly* (Spring 2001), 56. Also see Oswald Bayer, “Toward a Theology of Lament” in *Caritas et Reformatio: Essays on Church and Society in Honor of Carter Lindberg*. Edited by David M. Whitford (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002): 211–220. Also see Bernd Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, trans. Armin Siedlecki (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2013).

Jesus Himself is the source of God's mercy for humanity. The Lord puts that mercy into action in His preaching and miracles which all point to His death and resurrection which reconcile us to His Father.

Mercy, Bayer reminds us, is not self-evident in this world.¹⁸ We do not see it in nature. We do not see mercy in the way of life in the world where the consequences of sin are all too evident. Mercy is what God does (See Ex. 34:6; Ps. 103:2–4; Luke 1:46–55; Luke 1:68–79; Eph. 2:4–7; Titus 3:4–8; 1 Peter 1:3; 1 Peter 2:10, etc.). Mercy is not something we earn or deserve; it is a gift. That is why we speak of God's mercy in an "ethic of gift."¹⁹ Who we are and what we do is established by what we have been given. Think of the explanation of the First Article of the Creed in *Luther's Small Catechism*, where the Reformer confesses that God the Father Almighty has "made me and all creatures ... given me body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, and all that I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and **mercy**, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him."

We show mercy because we have received mercy from the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The triune God, in His mercy, has created, redeemed and sanctified us in body and soul. God's mercy is proclaimed and enacted. Francis of Assisi is often quoted as saying, "Preach the Gospel; use words if necessary." If Saint Francis said it, he was wrong. The Gospel requires words for it is through Jesus' words – words that are spirit and life – that faith is created and sustained. A wordless "ministry of presence" is quite presumptuous! We are to proclaim the deeds of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9–10), and this is nothing less than preaching the Word of the cross. In the face of inexplicable suffering, we proclaim the promise that there is

no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1) and that even in these events, God is at work for the good of His children even though we cannot understand how this is so.

The mercy that we proclaim and confess is also demonstrated as God uses us as "masks" from behind which He works to deliver mercy to those who suffer. One particularly potent example of this in Luther is his 1527 letter to the Breslau pastor John Hess on whether Christians may flee in times of plague. Just a few months before, in the summer of 1527, the plague struck Wittenberg. The university was relocated to Jena where it would remain until the following April. Even though the elector ordered Luther and his family to leave Wittenberg in August, he refused to do so. Instead, he continued lecturing on 1 John to the students who elected to remain in the town. Along with Bugenhagen and others, Luther would minister to the sick, dying and grieving. Luther referred to his home as a hospital. At the end of December after the epidemic had abated, Luther described his situation as hanging on to Christ by a thread even as Satan had bound him with an anchor chain and pulled him into the depths.²⁰ It was against this backdrop that Luther answered Pastor Hess's inquiry.

Luther provides an answer from the context of Christian freedom as it is to be applied within one's calling, where both the offices of faith and love are exercised. Faith trusts in God's providential care in the face of danger, recognizing that one's life is in God's hands whether one stays or leaves. Believers are to commend themselves into God's keeping whatever course of action they may take. So Luther writes:

If anyone is bound to remain in peril of death in order to serve his neighbor, let him commit himself to God's keeping and say: 'Lord, I am in thy hands. Thou hast obligated me to serve here. Thy will be done, for I am thy poor creature. Thou canst slay or preserve me here as well as if I were duty bound to suffer fire, water, thirst, or some other danger.' On the other hand, if anyone is not bound to serve his neighbor and is in a position to flee, let him also commit himself to God's keeping and say: 'Dear God, I am weak and afraid; I am therefore fleeing from this evil and am doing all that I can to defend myself against it. Nevertheless, I am in thy hands, whether

¹⁸ "Mercy is not self-evident. It cannot become an existential or epistemological principle. On the contrary mercy is actually something won and is something that, emerging, happens unpredictably. And so this justifying God is not simply and in principle merciful, so also is sinful man not simply and in principle on the receiving end of God's mercy." Oswald Bayer, "Mercy From the Heart" *Logia* XIX (Eastertide 2010), 30.

¹⁹ See Oswald Bayer, "The Ethics of Gift" in *Lutheran Quarterly* XXIV (Winter 2010), 275–287.

²⁰ See Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521–1532*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 209.

in this or some other evil that may befall me. Thy will be done. My flight will not save me, for evils and misfortunes will assail me everywhere and the devil, who is a murderer from the beginning and tries to commit murder and cause misfortune everywhere, does not sleep or take a holiday.²¹

Noting that some insist that the believer must not flee a deadly epidemic but accept the affliction as God's judgment enduring whatever fate may come in patience and unswerving faith, while other believers think it acceptable to leave if not bound by other obligations, Luther cautions that neither alternative is the grounds for inflicting the conscience of those who come to opposing conclusions. Those who are strong in faith may indeed wait the pestilence out, but they are not to bind those whose faith is weak to their opinion. "Let him who is strong in faith stay, but let him not condemn those who flee."²²

However, one may not flee an infected place if his calling to serve the neighbor is jeopardized. In cases where one's office — that of a pastor, governmental official or medical worker, for example — obligates him to serve the suffering neighbor, then there is no question in Luther's mind. He must stay even at the risk of his health and life in order to discharge duty to the neighbor. Drawing on Christ's words in John's Gospel (10:11–12) about the hireling who forsakes the flock when the thief comes, Luther concludes that faithful shepherds will not forsake those committed to their care in order to save their own lives. Here, Luther observes that there are two ways of fleeing death. One is to act contrary to God's Word or to recant one's confession of faith in order to preserve one's own life. The other ungodly way of escaping death is to abandon the neighbor in order to save one's self.

This does not mean for Luther that the instinct to preserve one's life is intrinsically wrong. He notes examples of Old Testament patriarchs and prophets who fled from death without abandoning their offices. Further, Luther suggests that if an adequate ministry is provided, not all pastors need remain in a time of crisis. Luther recalls the example of the apostle Paul in Damascus (see Acts 19:30) who slips out of the city to escape persecution. Given the fact that other ministers remained in Damascus to provide spiritual care for the Christians there, Paul was not himself bound to remain and face unnecessary danger. In a matter-of-fact manner, Luther offers the counsel that:

In time of death one is especially in need of the ministry which can strengthen and comfort one's conscience with God's Word and Sacrament in order to overcome death with faith. However, where enough preachers are available and they come to agreement among themselves that some of their number should move away because there is no necessity for their remaining in such danger, I do not count it a sin because an adequate ministry is provided, and, if need be, these would be ready and willing to stay.²³

Luther does not call for impulsive heroism when the neighbor's well-being is not at stake: "The instinct to flee death and save one's life is implanted by God and is not forbidden, provided it is not opposed to God and the neighbor."²⁴ However, to neglect the well-being of the neighbor in body or soul is in sin. Not only pastors but those who hold secular offices needed to protect the common good are bound to stay at their posts. Drawing on God's institution of governing authorities (Rom. 13:6) and parenthood (1 Tim. 5:8), Luther notes that these responsibilities override personal comfort and safety: "No one may forsake his neighbor when he is in trouble. Everybody is under obligation to help and support his neighbor as would himself like to be helped."²⁵ Having recently lectured to his university students on 1 John, Luther cites 1 John 1:14–17 where the apostle teaches that failure to love amounts to murder to instruct his readers as to what is at stake here. The Fifth Commandment binds us to care for the neighbor, helping and supporting him in every physical need. "Godliness," Luther says, is "nothing but divine service, and divine service is service to one's neighbor."²⁶ Christ hides behind the mask of the sick and needy to receive this service from us. To run away from an infected neighbor is to run away from Christ Himself.

Luther's letter to Pastor Hess gives expression to the place of faith and love in relationship to vocation. Faith that trusts in Christ alone is driven neither by foolish impulsiveness nor cowardice but by the confidence that living or dying, our lives are in the Lord's hands. The language of Luther's morning and evening prayers is expressed in the realization that God gives His holy angels

²¹ Tappert, 236.

²² Ibid., 235.

²³ Ibid., 232.

²⁴ Ibid., 233.

²⁵ Ibid., 233.

²⁶ Ibid., 239. For a helpful discussion of Luther's understanding of the positive demand of the fifth commandment, see Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Ten Commandments*, 226–232.

charge over us. They watch over us in times of danger and protect us in ways that exceed our imagination. Love will risk all things — even life itself — to do good to the neighbor in need.

Praying for mercy

In the face of suffering, we are bold to proclaim the mercy of God in the cross of Christ Jesus, to enact this mercy in our calling to serve the neighbor in need, but also to pray. The Lord's Prayer, to use the words of Georg Vicedom, is a prayer that spans the world so in one sense the whole of this prayer is prayed out of the crucible of suffering, but it is in particular the Seventh Petition that Luther accents when it comes to the Christian's supplication in the face of evil.

Luther, in the Large Catechism, sees the Seventh Petition as directed against Satan "who obstructs everything for which we ask: God's name or honor, God's kingdom and will, our daily bread, a good and cheerful conscience etc." In this petition where we summarize the Lord's Prayer, he tutors believers to call upon the heavenly Father for "rescue from every evil of body and soul," to use the language of the Small Catechism. Luther expands this in the Large Catechism:

This petition includes all the evil that may befall us under the devil's kingdom: poverty, disgrace, death, and, in short all the tragic misery and heartache, of which there is so incalculably much on earth. For the devil is not only a liar but a murderer as well, he incessantly seeks our life and vents his anger by causing accidents and injury to our bodies. He crushes some and drives others to injury; some he drowns in water, and many he hounds to suicide or other dreadful catastrophes (LC III:115, K/W, 455).²⁷

The recognition of the presence of evil and the inevitability of suffering, Luther says, drives us to pray this petition that Jesus has given us.

God has a love-hate relationship with afflictions. "God both loves and hates our afflictions. He loves them when they provoke us to prayer. He hates them when we are driven to despair by them."²⁸ Luther then goes on to spe-

cific biblical references to drive home this point. Coupling Ps. 50:23 ("The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me") and Ps.51:17 ("The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit and a contrite heart"), Luther seeks to demonstrate that even in the brokenness of affliction, the believer renders his life to God in the confidence that the Lord will remain true to His Word and not cast off those who hope in His mercy. Luther does not attempt to trivialize the pain, nor does he offer stoic-like advice to endure detached from the reality of one's situation. Instead, the broken heart is offered up to God knowing that "the Lord hears the gentle sighs of the afflicted."²⁹

Two governments and God's mercy

Another aspect of Luther's response to evil and suffering is seen in his understanding of the two kingdoms or the two governments.³⁰ Both of these governments or realms are under lordship of the triune God but he is working with different means and toward different ends. Through the government of His right hand, God is establishing an eternal kingdom through the preaching of the Gospel for the forgiveness of sins. Through the government of the left hand, God is not bestowing salvation, but working to curb evil, to do damage control so that this old creation does not completely collapse into chaos. Evil itself does persist in this old world, and it will not be done away with until Christ Jesus returns and brings about the new heaven and earth (see Is. 65:17–25; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1–25) In the meantime, He uses various callings or stations in life within the government of His left hand to curb evil both through the punishment of evil doers (Rom. 13) and caring bodily for those who suffer the effects of evil. Here think of physicians, nurses, rescue workers and the like. These offices are rightly confessed as good works of God, instruments through which God does His work of limiting the effects of evil in a fallen world that awaits its final redemption at the Day of the Lord.

Luther's pastoral response to suffering is multifac-

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ The literature on the two governments or two kingdoms is extensive. The treatments by Gerhard Ebeling are particularly helpful. See "The Necessity of the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms" in Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 386–406 and "The Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of the World" in Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 175–191. Also see James Nestingen, "The Two Kingdom's Distinction: An Analysis and Suggestion" *Word & World* 19(Summer 1999), 268–275. For the purposes of this paper, the article by Notger Slenczka, "God and Evil: Martin Luther's Teaching on Temporal Authority and the Two Realms" *Lutheran Quarterly* XXVI (Spring 2012), 1–25 is especially significant.

²⁷ Here see Albrecht Peters: "While the devil appeared in the Sixth Petition as a lying and seductive tempter, he now approaches as the destroyer of all the living, as the 'murderer' from the beginning onward. He ultimately stands behind the diversity of evil. Against him all the individual petitions of the Lord's Prayer are directed" – Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms*, trans. Daniel Thies (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 2004.

²⁸ Tappert, 87.

eted and rich with evangelical insight. Unlike those who attempt to pry into heaven in search of an answer to the “Why?” question, Luther points to the “Who?” and “What then?” The God who is Lord over wind and wave, who kills and makes alive, is none other than the baby who rests on Mary’s lap and hangs on a Roman cross. In Him, we know the good and gracious will of God to save sinners by forgiving them their sins. He is the God who is for us in every way, and on the Last Day, He will raise the dead and give eternal life to all believers in Christ. In the meantime, He calls us by the Gospel to walk by faith, not sight, trusting in His promises. As we wait for that final day, we are not idle. The mercy we have received turns our lives toward those in need of mercy. Indeed, hidden in their suffering is the Lord Himself. To care for them is to care for Christ.

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