



JOHANN VON STAUPITZ

A BIBLE STUDY ON JOHANN VON STAUPITZ

Martin Luther's Mentor and Confessor

“Jesus Sinners Doth Receive”

(TLH 324; LW 229; LSB 609)

(Luke 15:2-4; Luke 5:31-32; Matt. 9:12-13; 1 Tim. 1:15-16; 1 Peter 1:18-19)

“If it had not been for Dr. Staupitz, I should have sunk in hell.”

— Martin Luther

After finishing his education in Leipzig, Cologne and Tübingen, Johann von Staupitz, the vicar general of the German Augustinian Observantines, was appointed dean of the theological faculty at the newly founded University of Wittenberg in 1502. At the Augustinian cloister in Erfurt, Staupitz counseled the tormented monk Martin Luther to look to God's love instead of his countless and continuous sins, to little avail. (It is reported that Luther on at least one occasion confessed his sins to Staupitz for six hours.) The vicar general encouraged Luther to study for the Doctor of Theology degree. In 1512, Staupitz resigned his professorship at the University of Wittenberg; Luther was inaugurated as professor of the Bible that same year.

In the early days of the Indulgence Controversy (1517), Staupitz sided with Luther. However, as the Reformation advanced and, subsequently, more pressure was placed upon him by the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, Staupitz released Martin Luther from the Augustinian order (thus keeping the order out of the controversy and giving Luther more freedom to act). As a result of his friendship with Luther, Staupitz also was ordered to recant. While refusing to recant, he allowed the final decision about his actions concerning Luther to rest with the pope. His contributions in reforming abuses within the Roman church ended early in the Reformation, and he saw Luther's later reforms as dangerous attacks on Rome's authority and an abuse of Christian freedom.

STANZA ONE

Jesus sinners doth receive; / Oh, may all this saying ponder / Who in sin's delusions live / And from God and heaven wander! / Here is hope for all who grieve: / Jesus sinners doth receive.

Through his studies in the monastery, Martin Luther's conscience was quickened. He increasingly saw himself

as a fallen, sinful young man, completely unworthy of God's mercy and favor. Christian instruction includes a deepening knowledge of Moses and the Law. This is why the Ten Commandments are memorized and studied at the beginning of being catechized. Instead of finding peace in the monastery, Luther found more and more reason why he would be damned to hell because of his sinful thoughts, words and deeds — by what he had done and what he had failed to do.

1. What was the incredible scandal of “[receiving] sinners and [eating] with them” (LUKE 15:2)? How does this eventually become a source of hope and peace for Luther and all who are convicted of the reality of sin?

STANZA TWO

We deserve but grief and shame, / Yet His words, rich grace revealing, / Pardon, peace, and life proclaim; / Here our ill's have perfect healing. / Firmly in these words believe: / Jesus sinners doth receive.

Luther's attempts to become more holy and righteous only made matters worse. He could no longer, despite Staupitz's counseling, see God as anything but a wrathful God who would punish all sin and disobedience.

2. Why does Jesus expose the sin of those He came to save? Why is Jesus' diagnosis of the fallen human condition so severe? In what ways is Jesus not only the diagnostician but also the medicine for those helplessly caught in the disease of sin (LUKE 5:31-32)?

STANZA THREE

Sheep that from the fold did stray / No true shepherd e'er forsaketh; / Weary souls that lost their way / Christ, the Shepherd, gently taketh / In His arms that they may live: / Jesus sinners doth receive.

Martin Luther wrongly believed that Christ came as mere example of a sinless, holy, righteous life so that we would imitate Him and earn our way to heaven. Although Luther was willing to sacrifice even his physical health

in order to secure heaven, he fell deeper and deeper into despair.

3. Luther's sincere sacrifices as a monk did not make him more worthy of heaven, but brought him closer to the terrors of hell. What does Christ mean when He elevates mercy over sacrifice in Matt. 9:12–13? What is the place of sacrifice in the revelation of God's Word through the prophets and apostles? Whose sacrifice redeems? Whose sacrifice is nothing more than freely offered thanks for undeserved salvation given and received by faith?

STANZA FOUR

I, a sinner, come to Thee / With a penitent confession. / Savior, mercy show to me; / Grant for all my sins remission. / Let these words my soul relieve: / Jesus sinners doth receive.

Staupitz believed that Luther's preoccupation with his sin might be relieved if the young monk busied himself with teaching as a professor of Holy Scripture. Christ, the Good Shepherd, guided Luther to a study of the Psalms, Galatians and Romans, where Luther could clearly hear the voice of the gentle, merciful Shepherd. Here the gates of heaven were opened for Luther as he received the crucified-and-resurrected-for-sinners Jesus of the Bible.

4. Describe the difference between St. Peter's initial encounter with Jesus (LUKE 5:8) and his encounter with Jesus after His resurrection (JOHN 21:15–17). How does this mirror Luther's experience and our experience?

STANZA FIVE

Oh, how blest it is to know: / Were as scarlet my transgression, / It shall be as white as snow / By Thy blood and bitter passion; / For these words I now believe: / Jesus sinners doth receive.

"If you are not a sinner, Jesus has not come for you." By God's grace, Luther embraced himself as sinner, allowing Jesus to be the deliverer of sinners.

5. How is our confession of "poor, miserable sinner" a confession of what Jesus has come to do in us and through us? Why is it a sinful delusion to believe that if we just try hard enough, we can do something to save ourselves and those around us?

6. Even the devil knows that Jesus died as a substitute for sin. Martin Luther and the Lutheran Reformation make a big deal of the words "for you." What difference does hearing the historical facts of Jesus' death and resurrection make with the added words "for you"?

STANZA SIX

Now my conscience is at peace; / From the Law I stand acquitted. / Christ hath purchased my release / And my ev'ry sin remitted. / Naught remains my soul to grieve: / Jesus sinners doth receive.

The center of all theology is the justification of sinners by grace through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Eternal peace is only gifted by Christ's substitutionary life, death and resurrection. Review 1 Peter 18-19 and Luther's Explanation of the Second Article of the Creed. How does this mirror the words of stanza six and Luther's rediscovery of the Gospel of Christ?

7. Note the central place of "peace" as Jesus' cross-won gift for His disciples (JOHN 14:27; 16:33; 20:19; 20:21, 26; ROM. 5:1). What is the relationship between "complete remission" and "complete peace"?

STANZA Seven

Jesus sinners doth receive; / Also I have been forgiven; / And when I this earth must leave, / I shall find an open heaven. / Dying, still to Him I cleave: / Jesus sinners doth receive.

Christians die as sinners declared righteous for the sake of Christ. "Also I have been forgiven" suggests the confession of St. Paul when he says he is chief of sinners (1 TIM. 1:15).

8. Why are some Christians disturbed to see more sinful thoughts, words and deeds in their life now than when they first believed in Christ? Why is it so dangerous to believe that as we mature as Christians, we are becoming more and more holy and acceptable to the almighty Lord of heaven and earth?