



A BIBLE STUDY ON MARTIN LUTHER

AUGUSTINIAN MONK — REFORMER OF THE CHURCH

“FROM DEPTHS OF WOE I CRY TO THEE”

(Text by Martin Luther, *TLH* 329; *LW* 230; *LSB* 607)
(Psalm 130; Eph. 2:8–9; Rom. 5:20–21; 1 Tim. 1:14)

Martin Luther knew the Psalms; he had to memorize them in his headlong pursuit to be the best Augustinian ever. But Luther the monk didn't really know the Psalms until he found himself in the death spiral of attempting to win the Lord's applause through a self-manufactured righteousness while seeing more and more clearly the gravity of his own sinful condition. Instead of escaping a sinful and dying world, Luther was exposed to the vanity of living an outwardly righteous life at the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt. He was plunged into desperation by the suffocating weight of his inability to keep the demands of the Law. He realized he could do nothing to cure his own wretched, sin-infected condition. The harder he tried to become his own redeemer, the further he sank into hopeless despair until his eyes were placed on Jesus and His substitutionary sacrifice in Luther's stead. Luther's angst was exchanged for trust and peace in the freely given Gospel.

The Psalms spoke to Luther in a completely different way after he had utterly given up on winning for himself his own righteousness. Psalm 130 was traditionally labeled as one of seven “Penitential Psalms” and was included in Luther's first published commentary in 1517 (see *Luther's Works, American Edition* 14:189–194).

Written six years after posting the 95 Theses, the text of this hymn stands as a testament to Luther's desire to provide the Psalms to the German-speaking Church. This hymn was included in all major Lutheran hymnals in the Reformation era. Its clear presentation of the Word of God and the comfort of the Gospel of Christ were sung during the funeral services of Frederick the Wise, John the Steadfast and the redeemed monk Martin Luther.

From the time of the Reformation, the words of Is. 30:15a have been associated with the Christ-given faith and contentment given to Martin Luther and all believing Christians: “For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, ‘In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.’” In quietness and trust Luther continued to cry out to his Lord, confident that his Lord would mercifully answer.

STANZA ONE

*From depths of woe I cry to Thee, / In trial and tribulation;
/ Bend down Thy gracious ear to me, / Lord, hear my
supplication. / If Thou rememb'rest ev'ry sin, / Who then
could heaven ever win / Or stand before Thy presence?*

Faith in God's Word hears Moses and the Ten Commandments and, instead of excusing or accusing, makes the confession, “I am a sinner and deserve nothing more but the Almighty's wrath and punishment.” Faith also believes that if we are to be rescued from our own misery, the Lord will have to rescue. God-given trust in the Lord says, “Although it seems the Lord does not hear my cry, I will continue to call out to him and plead for his grace and mercy” (Ps. 9:10; 20:7).

1. Why is the unbelieving world so uncomfortable with a Christian's simple and unapologetic confession of sin before God and neighbor (LUKE 23:39–43)? What does a Lutheran congregation confess when it begins every Sunday morning service with the confession of sin? Where does this confession of sin point us and our neighbor-in-need (JOHN 1:29)?

2. The sixth chapter of Isaiah (verses 1–6) reveals the weight of despair experienced when lost and condemned creatures find themselves in the presence of a righteous and holy God. Both the prophet Isaiah and the monk Luther cried out, “Woe is me! I am as good as dead before the Lord of Hosts!” Note that Isaiah abandoned any attempt to make some empty promise or silly excuse to quench the Lord's anger over sin. It is the Lord Himself who initiates, carries out and fulfills Isaiah's — and Luther's — salvation. Trial and tribulation (*Anfechtung*) taught Luther the truth of redemption: Either the forgiving Lord stoops down to deliver, or we are eternally lost.

STANZA TWO

*Thy love and grace alone avail / To blot out my
transgression; / The best and holiest deeds must fail /
To break sin's dread oppression. / Before Thee none can
boasting stand, / But all must fear Thy strict demand / And
live alone by mercy.*

Luther was broken of the empty promise he made to St. Anne to become holy and righteous by becoming a monk. The Scriptures revealed that Martin's problem was not simply bad behavior before others but a sinful condition that he could not keep secret from the Maker of heaven and earth. Everything concerning our rescue from the power of the Law rested on God and the Redeemer He had sent. Luther was given the grace to accept the truth revealed in Scripture that God is the righteous Judge, "who cannot and will not let even one sin go unpunished." Because of the Old Adam, the Law continued to come and condemn any human attempt to merit heaven's favor; yet the sweet Gospel continued to come, desiring to have the last word: "My Son has taken upon himself the crushing weight of your sins and exchanged them for his holiness."

3. The Augustinian order was well-known for taking humanity's sinful condition seriously. Both the sin we have inherited from our disobedient parents, along with the sin we ourselves have committed come with a death sentence. All our good deeds are stained with sin and self-centered desires. St. Augustine learned this from the Spirit-inspired words of St. Paul in Romans (7:18). We, as sinful creatures, are curved into ourselves. Luther re-discovered this truth in his study of Romans. How is this fundamental truth today ignored by the world and made light of in many denominations that call themselves Christian?

4. Our old nature can only excuse one's own breaking of the Ten Commandments while accusing others who appear to be greater sinners than ourselves. The Reformation began with the first of Luther's 95 Theses: "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said, 'Repent' [MATTHEW 4:17], willed that the whole life of believers should be one of repentance." How did Christ, through St. Paul and St. Augustine, show Luther that the Christian life is a life of constant confession and absolution? Is this reflected in our churches and homes today?

STANZA THREE

Therefore my hope is in the Lord / And not in mine own merit; / It rests upon His faithful Word / To them of contrite spirit / That He is merciful and just; / This is my comfort and my trust. / His help I wait with patience.

The psalmist waits patiently on the Lord, trusting that He will come to deliver in His time and in His way. Therefore, true Christian faith does not simply wait but waits patiently and expectantly, believing the Lord will surely rescue and deliver. The Lord Christ is our holiness and righteousness.

5. If not on one's own good intentions and works, upon what does the believing Christian pin his hope? Why does everything rise and fall with this specific object of faith and trust (PS. 130:5B; JER. 23:6)?

6. "My soul always has its face directed straight toward God and confidently awaits his coming and his help, no matter how it may be delayed," writes Luther (AE 14:192).

How does the devil, the world and our old, fallen nature tempt us to forsake Christ when faithfulness in waiting is required? Whose forsakenness has resulted in our rescue?

STANZA FOUR

And though it tarry through the night / And till the morning waken, / My heart shall never doubt His might / Nor count itself forsaken. / O Israel, trust in God your Lord. / Born of the Spirit and the Word, / Now wait for His appearing.

Luther writes, "One must wait for the Lord from one morning to the next, namely, constantly and steadily. And if God were to delay the whole day, we should wait until the next day" (AE 14:193). This is the attitude of true faith of the children of Israel throughout the Old Testament and into the New. "If the Lord is delayed in his rescue, what of it? I will continue to wait for his gracious appearing."

7. Is Psalm 130 (or Luther's hymn based on it) only for believers in Christ in Old Testament times? Who is the Lord's Israel (GAL. 6:16)?

8. What faith-destroying things happen when we begin to doubt that the Lord Christ will surely come to rescue and deliver (GEN. 16:1-3). Have you seen Christians give in to this devastating temptation? Why is a firm faith in the promises of Christ and His Word and Sacraments the only solid rock for a weak and helpless Christian (IS. 26:4; PS. 143:8A)?

STANZA FIVE

Though great our sins, yet greater still / Is God's abundant favor; / His hand of mercy never will / Abandon us, nor waver. / Our shepherd good and true is He, / Who will at last His Israel free / From all their sin and sorrow.

Great is our sin and sinfulness, and so are the consequences of what we have done and what we have become. The fall into sin was a headlong fall into sickness, death and despair. But greater still is the Lord's abiding grace and mercy in Christ (1 JOHN 3:20). Wayward sheep do not need another "rule for holy living" but a forgiving, self-giving Shepherd. In His holy life and sacrificial death for us and for the world, our resurrected Lord is both the Good Shepherd and the great Deliverer.

9. The proper distinction between Law and Gospel in Holy Scripture is a blessing of God through Luther and the Reformation. What is the proper order when it comes to the revelation of Law and Gospel? (What Word do we need to hear first?) Give an example of how the unbelieving world gets it wrong on both accounts: the greatness of our sin / sinfulness and the even greater reality of God's declaration of righteousness through his Son Jesus.

10. What makes this hymn a source of true and lasting comfort and hope to believers in Christ who face the darkness of death and despair? Why is this hymn of Luther appropriate for both a Reformation Day service and a Christian funeral service?