

## Session Three: Spiritual Distress and Mental Illness

Read Handout and Chapter Five – pp. 57-67

### Handout: Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings

#### "A Correct Way of Studying Theology"

I want to point out to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have had practice in that. If you keep to it, you will become so learned that you yourself could (if it were necessary) write books just as good as those of the fathers and councils... This is the way taught by holy King David (and doubtlessly used also by all the patriarchs and prophets) in the one hundred nineteenth Psalm. There you will find the three rules, amply presented throughout the whole Psalm. They are *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*. [Prayer, meditation, *anfechtung*] (285)

Firstly, you should know that the Holy Scriptures constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness... therefore you should straightway despair of your reason and understanding... But kneel down in your little room and pray to God with real humility and earnestness that He through His dear Son may give you His Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding. (286)

Secondly, you should meditate, that is, not only in your heart, but also externally, by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them (286-287)

Thirdly, there is *tentatio, Anfechtung*. This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom...

As soon as God's Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you, and by his assaults will teach you to seek and to love God's Word. I myself (if you will permit, me mere mouse-dirt, to be mingled with pepper) am deeply indebted to my papists that through the devil's raging they have beaten, oppressed, and distressed me so much. That is to say, they have made a fairly good theologian of me, which I would not have become otherwise. (287)

**Chapter Five: *Anfechtung* and Mental Illness, pp.57-67**

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths.*

– Proverbs 3:5-6

*13That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles<sup>a</sup> from Jerusalem, 14and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. 16But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17And he said to them, “What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad. 18Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” 19And he said to them, “What things?” And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. 21But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. 22Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, 23and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. 24Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” 25And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” 27And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*

*28So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, 29but they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So he went in to stay with them. 30When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. 31And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. 32They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” 33And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem.*

- Luke 24:13-33

*Immediately the father of the child cried out<sup>d</sup> and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”*

- Mark 9:24

**Distinguishing *Anfechtung* and Mental Illness**

[Luther] struggled to believe what he so openly – in the face of tremendous danger – taught and preached. Luther referred to these types of trials as his *Anfechtung*.

There is no direct English equivalent of the German word. In 1950, Roland H. Bainton described *Anfechtung* as “doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation.” David Scaer acknowledged the many ways the word is translated, then stated, “*Anfechtung* is perhaps better understood not as one vocable in Luther’s vocabulary, but as a one-word theological concept. (57)

[Referencing the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, Luther says:] *From this we learn, first, that weakness and defects remain even in those who are now Christians... Faith is not such a trifling or easy matter as foolish and inexperienced spirits imagine... Christians and believers experience – both in others and in themselves – confess, and lament their weakness... They have to fight and contend against their weakness all their lives...*

*But look at how [Christ] intentionally accepts these two who are weak in faith, cares for them, and does everything to aid their weakness and to strengthen their faith. Because He sees and knows that they had gone away from the other apostles troubled and sad, not knowing what they should think or hope, He does not want to leave them stuck, remaining in such doubt and temptation. (58)*

Luther distinguished *Anfechtung* and mental health problems. Luther taught that *Anfechtung* was essential to faith, even though it is emotionally distressing. It has the salubrious effect of driving us to Christ's cross to pray that the Holy Spirit strengthen our faith. We are the weeping disciple who fell to his knees and begged Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). Luther wrote, "I would like to write a book about *Anfechtung*. Without it no man can rightly understand the Holy Scriptures or know what the fear and love of God is all about. In fact, without *Anfechtung* one does not really know what the spiritual life is." He is likewise recorded at the table by John Schlaginhausen on December 11, 1531: "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." *Anfechtung* is inevitable, but it is not mental illness.

In the same way, mental illness is not an indication of spiritual problems... Consider the many persons in the Bible who talked directly with God but nonetheless had fear and sadness, including Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Jonah, Peter and so many others. (58-59)

### **The Depredations of the Theology of Glory**

In the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, Luther said the "theologian of glory" prefers "works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil." ... According to these false teachers, *Anfechtung* has no place in the life of a believer, nor does emotional suffering. Anyone who experiences either must say to themselves, "The reason for my suffering is my lack of faith," and their suffering is magnified by guilt... In the face of such terrible teaching and consequent fear, victims of this perverse theology might be compelled to stop believing. (61)

In a letter to [Valentine Hausmann], dated June 24, 1532, Luther wrote, "Under no circumstances allow yourself to become impatient because you do not at once have strong faith." He cajoled, "God is not the kind of father who casts off sick and erring children; if He were, He would have no children." (62)

## PREFACE TO THE WITTENBERG EDITION OF LUTHER'S GERMAN WRITINGS

*Dr. Martin Luther's Preface*

I would have been quite content to see my books, one and all, remain in obscurity and go by the board. Among other reasons, I shudder to think of the example I am giving, for I am well aware how little the church has been profited since they have begun to collect many books and large libraries, in addition to and besides the Holy Scriptures, and especially since they have stored up, without discrimination, all sorts of writings by the church fathers, the councils, and teachers. Through this practice not only is precious time lost, which could be used for studying the Scriptures, but in the end the pure knowledge of the divine Word is also lost, so that the Bible lies forgotten in the dust under the bench (as happened to the book of Deuteronomy, in the time of the kings of Judah) (1) .

Although it has been profitable and necessary that the writings of some church fathers and councils have remained, as witnesses and histories, nevertheless I think, "*Est modus in rebus*," (2) and we need not regret that the books of many fathers and councils have, by God's grace, disappeared. If they had all remained in existence, no room would be left for anything but books; and yet all of them together would not have improved on what one finds in the Holy Scriptures.

It was also our intention and hope, when we ourselves began to translate the Bible into German, (3) that there should be less writing, and instead more studying and reading of the Scriptures. For all other writing is to lead the way into and point toward the Scriptures, as John the Baptist did toward Christ, saying, "He must increase, but I must decrease" [John 3:30], in order that each person may drink of the fresh spring himself, as all those fathers who wanted to accomplish something good had to do.

Neither councils, fathers, nor we, in spite of the greatest and best success possible, will do as well as the Holy Scriptures, that is, as well as God himself has done. (We must, of course, also have the Holy Spirit, faith, godly speech, and works, if we are to be saved.) Therefore it behooves us to let the prophets and apostles stand at the professor's lectern, while we, down below at their feet, listen to what they say. It is not they who must hear what we say.

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I cannot, however, prevent them from wanting to collect and publish my works through the press (small honor to me), although it is not my will. I have no choice but to let them risk the labor and the expense of this project. My consolation is that, in time, my books will lie forgotten in the dust anyhow, especially if I (by God's grace) have written anything good. *Non ere melior Patribus meis*. (4) He who comes second should indeed be the first one forgotten. Inasmuch as they have been capable of leaving the Bible itself lying under the bench, and have also forgotten the fathers and the councils—the better ones all the faster—accordingly there is a good hope, once the overzealousness of this time has abated, that my books also will not last long. There is especially good hope of this, since it has begun to rain and snow books and teachers, many of which already lie there forgotten and moldering. Even their names are not remembered any more, despite their confident hope that they would eternally be on sale in the market and rule churches.

Very well, so let the undertaking proceed in the name of God, except that I make the friendly request of anyone who wishes to have my books at this time, not to let them on any account hinder him from studying the Scriptures themselves. Let him put them to use as I put the excrees and excretals (5) of the pope to use, and the books of the sophists. That is, if I occasionally wish to see what they have done, or if I wish to ponder the historical facts of the time, I use them. But I do not study in them or act

in perfect accord with what they deemed good. I do not treat the books of the fathers and the councils much differently.

Herein I follow the example of St. Augustine, (6) who was, among other things, the first and almost the only one who determined to be subject to the Holy Scriptures alone, and independent of the books of all the fathers and saints. On account of that he got into a fierce fight with St. Jerome, who reproached him by pointing to the books of his forefathers; but he did not turn to them. And if the example of St. Augustine had been followed, the pope would not have become Antichrist, and that countless mass of books, which is like a crawling swarm of vermin, would not have found its way into the church, and the Bible would have remained on the pulpit.

Moreover, I want to point out to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have had practice in that. If you keep to it, you will become so learned that you yourself could (if it were necessary) write books just as good as those of the fathers and councils, even as I (in God) dare to presume and boast, without arrogance and lying, that in the matter of writing books I do not stand much behind some of the fathers. Of my life I can by no means make the same boast. This is the way taught by holy King David (and doubtlessly used also by all the patriarchs and prophets) in the one hundred nineteenth Psalm. There you will find three rules, amply presented throughout the whole Psalm. They are *Oratio*, *Meditatio*, *Tentatio*. (7)

Firstly, you should know that the Holy Scriptures constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness, because not one teaches about eternal life except this one alone. Therefore you should straightway despair of your reason and understanding. With them you will not attain eternal life, but, on the contrary, your presumptuousness will plunge you and others with you out of heaven (as happened to Lucifer) into the abyss of hell. But kneel down in your little room [Matt. 6:6] and pray to God with real humility and earnestness, that he through his dear Son may give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding.

Thus you see how David keeps praying in the above-mentioned Psalm, “Teach me, Lord, instruct me, lead me, show me,” (8) and many more words like these. Although he well knew and daily heard and read the text of Moses and other books besides, still he wants to lay hold of the real teacher of the Scriptures himself, so that he may not seize upon them pell-mell with his reason and become his own teacher. For such practice gives rise to factious spirits who allow themselves to nurture the delusion that the Scriptures are subject to them and can be easily grasped with their reason, as if they were Markolf (9) or Aesop’s Fables, for which no Holy Spirit and no prayers are needed.

Secondly, you should meditate, that is, not only in your heart, but also externally, by actually (10) repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard, and spoken them once or twice, and that you then have complete understanding. You will never be a particularly good theologian if you do that, for you will be like untimely fruit which falls to the ground before it is haft ripe.

Thus you see in this same Psalm how David constantly boasts that he will talk, meditate, speak, sing, hear, read, by day and night and always, about nothing except God’s Word and commandments. For God will not give you his Spirit without the external (11) Word; so take your cue from that. His command to write, preach, read, hear, sing, speak, etc., outwardly (12) was not given in vain.

Thirdly, there is *tentatio, Anfechtung*. This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.

Thus you see how David, in the Psalm mentioned, complains so often about all kinds of enemies, arrogant princes or tyrants, false spirits and factions, whom he must tolerate because he meditates, that is, because he is occupied with God's Word (as has been said) in all manner of ways. For as soon as God's Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you, and by his assaults (13) will teach you to seek and love God's Word. I myself (if you will permit me, mere mouse-dirt, to be mingled with pepper) am deeply indebted to my papists that through the devil's raging they have beaten, oppressed, and distressed me so much. That is to say, they have made a fairly good theologian of me, which I would not have become otherwise. And I heartily grant them what they have won in return for making this of me, honor, victory, and triumph, for that's the way they wanted it.

There now, with that you have David's rules. If you study hard in accord with his example, then you will also sing and boast with him in the Psalm, "The law of thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces" [Ps. 119:72]. Also, "Thy commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep thy precepts," etc. [Ps. 119:98–100]. And it will be your experience that the books of the fathers will taste stale and putrid to you in comparison. You will not only despise the books written by adversaries, but the longer you write and teach the less you will be pleased with yourself. When you have reached this point, then do not be afraid to hope that you have begun to become a real theologian, who can teach not only the young and imperfect Christians, but also the maturing and perfect ones. For indeed, Christ's church has all kinds of Christians in it who are young, old, weak, sick, healthy, strong, energetic, lazy, simple, wise, etc.

If, however, you feel and are inclined to think you have made it, flattering yourself with your own little books, teaching, or writing, because you have done it beautifully and preached excellently; if you are highly pleased when someone praises you in the presence of others; if you perhaps look for praise, and would sulk or quit what you are doing if you did not get it—if you are of that stripe, dear friend, then take yourself by the ears, and if you do this in the right way you will find a beautiful pair of big, long, shaggy donkey ears. Then do not spare any expense! Decorate them with golden bells, so that people will be able to hear you wherever you go, point their fingers at you, and say, "See, See! There goes that clever beast, who can write such exquisite books and preach so remarkably well." That very moment you will be blessed and blessed beyond measure in the kingdom of heaven. Yes, in that heaven where hellfire is ready for the devil and his angels. To sum up: Let us be proud and seek honor in the places where we can. But in this book the honor is God's alone, as it is said, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" [1 Pet. 5:5]; to whom be glory, world without end, Amen. (14)

<sup>1</sup> Cf. II Kings 22:8. In Luther's German Bible, Deuteronomy is referred to as "the fifth book of Moses."

<sup>2</sup> "There is a reason for the way things happen." Horace *Satires* I, 1, 106.

<sup>3</sup> Luther began to translate the Bible into German during his confinement to the Wartburg. In a letter to Johann Lang, December 18, 1521, he announced his intention to translate the New Testament into German. *WA*, Br 2, 413. This letter contains the first reference to Luther's intention to translate the Bible.

<sup>4</sup> I Kings 19:4. "I am no better than my fathers."

<sup>5</sup> That is, "decrees and decretals." The translator has attempted to render Luther's pun "*Drecket und Drecketal*" in English.

<sup>6</sup> *Epistola* 82. Migne 33, 277.

<sup>7</sup> Prayer, meditation, *Anfechtung*.

<sup>8</sup> Ps. 119:26 *et al.*

<sup>9</sup> The very popular medieval legend of Solomon and Markolf was treated in a verse epic, chapbooks, dialogues, and farces. The figure of Markolf, a sly and unprincipled rogue, was known in Germany as early as the tenth century.

<sup>10</sup> *Eusserlich*.

<sup>11</sup> *Eusserlich*.

<sup>12</sup> *Eusserlich*. The correspondence Luther intends to show between actual (*eusserlich*) study of the Bible in its outward (*eusserlich*) form and the external (*eusserlich*) Word as a medium of God's address cannot be rendered in idiomatic English by translating *eusserlich* with one word.

<sup>13</sup> *Anfechtungen*.

<sup>14</sup> The last two sentences are in Latin in the original text.

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