

Luther on Prayer as Authentic Communication

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In June, 1530, Martin Luther was at the Coburg castle while Melanchthon and other supporters of the Reformation were in Augsburg at the Diet of Augsburg. Interrupting his other work, Luther wrote a commentary on his favorite psalm, Psalm 118. In commenting on Psalm 118:5 (Out of my distress I called on the Lord: the Lord answered me and set me free) Luther wrote:

You must learn to call. Do not sit by yourself or lie on a couch, hanging and shaking your head. Do not destroy yourself with your own thoughts by worrying. Do not strive and struggle to free yourself, and do not brood on your wretchedness, suffering, and misery. Say to yourself: “Come on, you lazy bum; down on your knees, and lift your eyes and hands toward heaven!” Read a psalm or the Our Father, call on God, and tearfully lay your troubles before Him. Mourn and pray, as this verse teaches . . . Here you learn that praying, reciting your troubles, and lifting up your hands are sacrifices most pleasing to God. It is His desire and will that you lay your troubles before Him. He does not want you to multiply your troubles by burdening and torturing yourself. He wants you to be too weak to bear and overcome such troubles; He wants you to grow strong in Him. By His strength He is glorified in you. Out of such experiences people become real Christians.¹

Comments on prayer abound in Luther’s writings. These stretch from very practical “how to” advice to deep theological reflection on what prayer tells us about God and our relationship with God. Yet until recently prayer was almost completely ignored in Luther studies. Theologians gave much attention to Luther’s doctrine of the Word, discussing how God speaks to us and what God says. Much less attention was given to how we speak to God.² Yet Luther gave tremendous attention to prayer, frequently speaking, writing and preaching on it. Luther included “prayer, praise, and thanksgiving” as one of the identifying marks of the church in his 1539 treatise *On the Councils and the Church*. He also included prayer in his *Small Catechism*, advocating that every Christian should know and pray the Lord’s Prayer and also providing prayers to set a pattern for daily

life. Prayer was not just some interesting adjunct to Luther's basic theological insights or an interesting sidelight; prayer was central to how Luther understood the Christian's life and the life of the church. After a very brief discussion of historical context, this essay will describe some of Luther's emphases in teaching prayer. It will discuss how Luther's view of prayer shaped his view of God and of human life. Concluding remarks reflect briefly on what this might mean today.

Luther's reformation of prayer paralleled and sprang out of his new understanding of justification. Just as God creates and sustains us, redeems and sanctifies us without any merit or worthiness on our part, so also God hears our prayer without any merit or worthiness on our part. Just as the new relationship in Christ is pure gift, so also is communication with this God. We are not required to earn a hearing or to merit God's ears. Luther's teaching on prayer was forged from his general theological approach and in response to late medieval teaching. In his 1522 *Betbüchlein* (*Personal Prayer Book*) Luther had attacked the existing personal prayer books as among "the many harmful books and doctrines which are misleading and deceiving Christians" and giving rise to "false beliefs." Among other criticisms, he noted "They drub into the minds of simple people such un-Christian tomfoolery about prayers to God and his saints!"³ Luther knew that medieval prayer books and practices had conveyed many false ideas about prayer. At least five aspects of medieval prayer practices needed reform. Medieval Christians (1) were encouraged to pray to the Virgin Mary and the saints, (2) were taught that God would hear them only if they were worthy to be heard, (3) considered prayer a good work, and therefore (4) valued repetition as helpful in building up this good work, and (5) thought prayer primarily a work for clerics. Luther asserted that we pray to God because God has commanded us to pray to him, has promised to hear us and is capable of hearing us; no saint can claim this. God hears our prayer despite our unworthiness. Prayer is not a good work but rather honest communication with God. Christians should not mindlessly repeat prayers but instead boldly and persistently present their needs to God. All should pray, not just clerics.

Luther taught prayer in many ways and in many genres of literature—prayer book, catechism, biblical commentary, sermons, letters, even in polemics. His writings on the subject extend from very early in his career as a reformer to the end. In Lent of 1517 (before the Ninety-Five Theses!), Luther preached a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer; he reworked these for publication in 1519.⁴ Those sermons appeared at least twenty-three times by 1526 in places as diverse as Basel, Leipzig, Wittenberg, Augsburg, and Hamburg.⁵ His *Appeal for Prayer against the Turks*,⁶ was published in 1541, just five years before his death. Some of his writings on prayer became very popular. Multiple editions of Luther's works on prayer show that they achieved public resonance. His 1519 sermon *On Rogationtide Prayer and Procession* was reprinted thirteen times between 1519 and 1523.⁷ Luther's *Betbüchlein* (*Personal Prayer book*) was printed at least seventeen times between 1522 and 1525 (in Augsburg, Erfurt, Grimma, Wittenberg, Jena, and Strasbourg) and at least forty-four times by the end of the century.⁸ In some areas, it was the most popular prayerbook.⁹ Even *Appeal for Prayer against the Turks* was reprinted ten times in 1541–42.¹⁰ For the sake of contrast, consider his famous treatise *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520). It was published approximately fourteen times in the entire sixteenth century. Clearly, to consider Luther's impact in his time, one must consider his writings on prayer for they were popular and widespread. Writing in 1544, Luther claimed success for all evangelical efforts, including his own, to reform prayer practice.¹¹

Luther's Emphases

Luther's emphases when talking about prayer are manifold. What follows is not an exhaustive list but is intended to introduce the reader to some of the riches of Luther's thought on prayer.

1. *God Starts the Conversation.*

God starts the conversation—but it does not remain a one-sided conversation. Rather, it is an opening for relationship. God wants

people who will talk back! In his *Large Catechism*, Luther noted three reasons to pray: God commands us to pray, God promises to hear us, and God gives us the words. Notice that in all of these God speaks! God commands, promises, and gives the words. God's words initiate and enable our words. God wants so badly to hear from us that he commands us to pray. Luther repeats again and again that God hears prayer because God has commanded us to pray (and why would he command if he did not intend to hear?) AND promised to hear us. The worthiness of the one praying has absolutely no effect on whether prayers are heard; only God's command and promise count.

Consider the structure of Luther's catechisms. They start with God's movement toward us. In the Ten Commandments, God tells us how we should live and the Apostles' Creed summarizes what God does for us, actions that fall under the headings of creation, redemption, and sanctification. The third part of the catechism invites humans to talk back to God. This is really a profound point: Luther's conception of Christian faith recognizes that God not only speaks but God also listens—conversation is an integral part of the life of faith. Our unworthiness and even our ineptness do not inhibit or preclude prayer and do not influence how God hears us. Rather, God's words—the command to pray and the promise to hear—stake out the parameters of conversation.

2. *We Pray for Both Spiritual and Bodily Needs.*

Luther summarized in the *Large Catechism* the content of our prayer: We pray that God “may give, preserve, and increase in us faith and the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments.”¹² That is, we pray for everything named in what has preceded this in the catechism—we pray that we might live as God intends (commandments) and that we might trust—in all situations of life—the God who creates, redeems, and sustains us.

The Lord's Prayer provided a model of honest talk in regard to those bodily and spiritual needs. Consider Luther's explanations of the petitions in the Lord's Prayer. He clearly recognized and described spiritual needs—the need for the Word of God to be taught clearly

and purely among us, the need for the kingdom of God to come not merely in the abstract but to us, the need for God to break and hinder every evil scheme and will of the devil, the world, and our flesh. The Lord's Prayer contains some very honest talk about what helps and hinders the work of God in us.

Luther's explanation of the Lord's Prayer also honestly names our physical and social needs. Rejecting medieval interpretations that spiritualized the fourth petition ("Give us today our daily bread"), Luther in his *Small Catechism* yanked this petition firmly back into the realm of daily life.¹³ For Luther, "daily bread" meant:

Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.¹⁴

Luther did not hesitate to tell people to pray for very tangible matters. In *Appeal for Prayer Against the Turks* (1541)¹⁵ Luther spent quite a bit of space telling his readers that they, in fact, deserved God's judgment in the form of the Turks. Then he went on to tell them that they had every right to call upon God for deliverance from the Turks.

Luther also advocated specificity in our thanksgiving to God. Luther saw in Psalm 118 a "general statement of thanksgiving for all the kindnesses God daily and unceasingly showers on all, both good and evil."¹⁶ While explicating verses 2 through 4 of that Psalm, Luther became very specific in naming for what we should give thanks: for temporal government and blessed peace," for "spiritual government, including priests, preachers, teachers, in short, the precious Word of God and the holy Christian Church," and for "the true assembly . . . the elect children of God and all the saints on earth."¹⁷ Luther did not merely thank God in general but named specifically how God's goodness is manifested among us.

3. *The Language of Prayer Should Be Honest and Forthright.*

Luther emphasized that the language of prayer should be honest, bold, forthright, and even foolish. It should, in other words, be authentic

communication, not language reluctant to state the truth or language “prettied up” because we think that will please God. Praying for faith and the fulfillment of God’s intentions for our lives means a lively honest interaction with God, not a passive “whatever.” Luther used numerous biblical examples to make the point that prayer is about honest—even painfully honest—communication.

Some of Luther’s most incisive comments in regard to prayer are found in his Genesis lectures, given in the last ten years of his life.¹⁸ See, for example, his comments on the story in Genesis 15 where God comes to Abram in a vision and declares “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” Abram is not particularly impressed, and complains “I continue childless” and observes “a slave born in my house will be my heir.” God repeats the promise “. . . your own son shall be your heir.” Then God brings Abram outside and says “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he promises, “So shall your descendants be.” Abram “believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

When Luther discussed Abram’s response to God, he notes that Abram “began to have doubts as to the protection and the kindness of God.”¹⁹ Several times Luther described Abram as doubting the fulfillment of God’s promise. He laments his childlessness with “words of profound grief and sorrow.”²⁰ Luther described him as pouring out “his complaint and the thoughts of a very troubled heart.”²¹ Luther did not criticize him for his despair or his doubt, nor did he criticize him for taking his complaint to God, rather Luther found this good and proper. Several times he said that in such trials we should “commend our cause to the Lord.”²² Luther was confident that “eventually He comes and encourages the humble.”²³

For Luther, Abram (Abraham) endured troubles just as did all the saints and even Christ himself (who had his Judas). Affliction drives and teaches the Christian to pray. Luther clearly viewed Abram not only as an example of faith but also as an example of what all Christians should do in times of trial—trust God, pour out their complaints to him, and commend their cause to God. Abram’s question and comment to God do not contradict God or seek another way,

but rather express understandable doubt and despair in trial. Luther emphasized God's unchanging faithfulness to the promise. When in despair and doubt the saints should go to the one who will re-assure them. Honest questions and doubt get an honest response from God.

Luther loved these stories of the patriarchs. A little later he comments on Genesis 18, where Abraham petitions God to spare Sodom. First Abraham asks God to save it for the sake of fifty righteous, but then he continues talking with God, bargaining with God, until God agrees to save the city for the sake of ten righteous. Luther, on the one hand, called it a "foolish prayer."²⁴ But he also called it a praiseworthy prayer, and praised Abraham for pleading for others. He also called the prayer "forceful and impulsive" "as if Abraham wanted to compel God to forgive"²⁵ and "bold."²⁶

Yet another example of bold and honest language is found in Genesis 19, in the story of Lot fleeing Sodom and his prayer. Luther noted, "Let us, therefore, pray boldly and with confidence." He reminded his listeners, "If He does not give what we are asking for, He will nevertheless give something else that is better; for prayer cannot be in vain . . ." That story of Lot and his prayer leads to the next point.

4. *Prayer May Try to Change God's Intention—and May Succeed at That.*

One of the Luther's most interesting discussions on prayer is found in his comments on the story of Lot fleeing the destruction of Sodom. Luther took a little noticed verse and turned it into a treatise on prayer. The account in Genesis 19 describes the angels seizing Lot and his family, taking them out of the city, and commanding them "Flee for your life . . . flee to the hills, lest you be consumed." Lot however does not like his destination and pleads in verses 19 and 20 not to be sent to the hills but rather to a nearby city. "Let me escape there!" Lot's request is granted.

For Luther, this story showed that God wants to be asked to do something and wants to respond to those asking. Luther described prayer as "highly necessary" and urged his listeners not to "be deceived by this evil temptation that we think that even without our prayer God will give us what we need, and that since He knows

what benefits us most, there is no need of prayer.” Luther made clear that Lot’s prayer changes God’s plan and intention and urged his listeners to note this carefully but at the same time not to “debate about the secret change of God’s will.” After quoting Psalm 145:19, “The Lord fulfills the desire of all who fear Him,” Luther reminded his listeners of the story of Joshua praying and commanding the sun to stand still.

But what is the reason? No other than that God does the will of those who fear Him and subordinates His will to ours, provided we continue to fear Him. Moreover, here the text states clearly enough that it is God’s will that Lot should not remain in any part of the region. But God changes this will because Lot fears God and prays.²⁷

Luther gave several examples from Scripture to show that “God allows himself to be prevailed upon and subordinates his will to ours.” This led Luther to question why we neglect to pray. “Why are we without faith to such an extent and so fainthearted, as though our prayer amounted to nothing?” Luther hammered on this point, apparently trying to convince his listeners that prayer really does matter. He noted, “we have been taught not only by the promises but also by the examples—that God wants to disregard His own will and do ours.” For Luther what was most important here was not the abstract theological point, that God changes his will because of something a human does. Rather, what was most important is the story’s concrete encouragement to pray: “Thus this account rouses and spurs us on to prayer in all our dangers, since God wants to do what we want, provided that we humbly prostrate ourselves before Him and pray.”²⁸

Luther contrasted Lot’s disagreement with God and clear request for change with what he called “murmuring.” Luther describes “murmuring” in this way: “It is murmuring, however, when we have been offended by a perplexing situation and ask God why He does this or that in such a manner.” In such a situation we should not be asking God why he is doing something but rather “if anything in His actions offends us, we must pray.”²⁹ Luther pointed his listeners away from contemplating or questioning—or even being overawed by—the mysteries of God and rather encouraged them into active

interaction with God—interaction that can include pleading with God and boldly asking him to change his will.

Luther returned several times to the theme that we can pray and ask God for a different result, even though we are terrified by our unworthiness and therefore hesitant to pray. Pointing out that Lot too was unworthy, he summarized:

Therefore let it be enough for us that we have been called to faith through the Word, have been taught by the Word of God, and for this reason are part of the church, which has the definite command to pray. Consequently, you should not look at your unworthiness; you should look at God's command and not debate whether you are worthy or not. But you should hold fast the promise that the Lord wants to do the will of those who fear Him.³⁰

This whole matter of God being willing to change his intention might make us nervous. Do we really want God to change his intention? What exactly might be changed? In a postil sermon for Maundy Thursday, Luther spoke to that issue.³¹ Commenting on Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, Luther distinguished between bodily matters and other matters. In matters that are not bodily matters—that God keep us in his word, save us, forgive us our sins, and give us the Holy Spirit and eternal life—in these matters God's will is already known and certain. God wants all humans to be saved, wants all humans to recognize their sin, and wants all to believe in forgiveness through Christ. We know and believe that he wants to do these.

But Luther noted that we cannot have the same certainty as to what God's will is in bodily matters. We do not know whether God wants us to experience sickness, poverty, and other trials and whether those serve God's honor and our salvation. For that reason, ask for God's help but leave it to God's will, whether he wants to help immediately. Prayer in this situation is not in vain for if God does not help immediately he will strengthen the heart and give grace and patience so that one may endure it and finally overcome it, as the example of Christ teaches. God did not take this cup away from Christ but sent him an angel to strengthen him. Luther assured his listeners that "So it will also happen with you, even if God would delay or deny his help."³² Luther recognized here that

God may choose to change his will—or he may choose NOT to change it.

5. *We Are to Be Persistent in Prayer—but Not Mindlessly Repetitious.*

In the *Large Catechism* Luther said we should “Call upon God incessantly . . . drum into his ears our prayer” but at the same time rejected the “kind of babbling and bellowing that used to pass for prayer in the church . . .”³³ In his lectures on I John (1527) Luther complained, “In the past . . . we did not know how to pray but knew only how to chatter and to read prayers. God pays no attention to this.”³⁴ Luther wanted to create a new evangelical prayer practice, one that encouraged persistent, thoughtful, and bold prayer in contrast to the mechanical recitation of prayers, done largely by a “praying” (monastic) class. In his commentary on Psalm 118 (1530) he warned:

You must never doubt that God is aware of your distress and hears your prayer. You must not pray haphazardly or simply shout into the wind. Then you would mock and tempt God. It would be better not to pray at all, than to pray like the priests and monks.³⁵

Rather than using prayer as a device to gain God’s favor, rather than repeating and repeating a prayer with the thought that repetition itself would please God, the Christian rests in the confidence that God has created a new relationship and encouraged us to call upon him with boldness and confidence within that relationship.

6. *The Forms of Prayer Are Both Received (Given) and Free.*

Luther made a number of comments about the forms of prayer. He considered the Lord’s Prayer the very best of all prayers. But he also offered a number of alternatives, evidence of a rich and wide-ranging prayer practice.

He expressed his high opinion of the Lord’s Prayer in a number of places. In *An Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519) he wrote:

Since our Lord is the author of this prayer, it is without a doubt the most sublime, the loftiest, and the most excellent. If he, the good and faithful Teacher, had known a better one, he would surely have taught us that too.³⁶

In his *Large Catechism* (1529) he commented: “. . . there is no nobler prayer to be found on earth, for it has the powerful testimony that God loves to hear it.”³⁷ For Luther, authentic communication, honest prayer, does not mean you have to be creative or extemporaneous. You can use the words Christ gave us.

Luther also recommended the use of catechetical elements to structure prayers and shape content. In 1535 Luther wrote a book on prayer for his barber.³⁸ In *A Simple Way to Pray* Luther focused on the three chief parts of the catechism—Ten Commandments, Apostles’ Creed, and Lord’s Prayer—to shape devotional and prayer practice. He made each of these into prayers. He described how he used the Ten Commandments to shape prayer:

I divide each commandment into four parts . . . That is, I think of each commandment as, first, instruction, which is really what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God demands of me so earnestly. Second, I turn it into a thanksgiving; third, a confession; and fourth, a prayer.³⁹

Luther included similar advice for praying the Apostles’ Creed and Lord’s Prayer. He also cautioned against too many words, “Take care, however, not to undertake all of this or so much that one becomes weary in spirit. Likewise, a good prayer should not be lengthy or drawn out, but frequent and ardent.”⁴⁰

Luther thought that biblical prayers could teach us much about both the form and content of prayer. One outline comes in the story of Lot fleeing Sodom (Genesis 19:17–22), Luther described a good prayer, like Lot’s prayer, as having three parts. “The first requirement of a good prayer is that it give thanks to God and recall in the heart and in words the benefits you have received from God.” Luther noted that “in the rules of rhetoric this is called gaining good will, which is best brought about by praise and giving thanks.” The second part is “either the complaint or the mention of the need.” The third is to request what you want. Luther seemed pleased that Lot not only does this “but enlarges on this request in an excellent manner by giving particulars.”⁴¹

In *On War Against the Turk* (1529) Luther exhorted to prayer and named a number of examples of biblical prayers to emulate. He urged his readers to

introduce words and examples from the Scriptures which show how strong and mighty a man's prayer has sometimes been; for example, Elijah's prayer which St. James praises [Jas. 5:17]; the prayers of Elisha and other prophets; of kings David, Solomon, Asa, Jehoshaphat,⁴² Jesias, Hezekiah, etc.; the story of how God promised Abraham that he would spare the land of Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of five righteous men. For the prayer of a righteous man can do much if it be persistent, St. James says in his Epistle [Jas. 5:16].⁴³

7. *Pray in Every Time of Need—and at Regular Times.*

Luther did not limit the occasions for prayer, nor did he totally reject set patterns for prayer times. He recognized that prayer often takes place in times of distress and great need—in fact, his explanation of the Second Commandment in the *Small Catechism* says that we should use God's name to call upon him “in every time of need.”⁴⁴ One example of how he described a time of great need comes in his comment on Abram's conversation with God in Genesis 15. Luther noted *when* prayer frequently happens:

It is characteristic of sublime trials to occupy hearts when they are alone. For this reason there is frequent mention in Holy Scripture of praying at night and in solitude. Affliction is the teacher of such praying. Thus because Abraham was occupied with these sad thoughts, he was unable to sleep. Therefore he got up and prayed; but while he is praying and feeling such great agitation within himself, God appears to him and converses with him in a friendly manner . . .⁴⁵

A particularly compelling example of praying in time of need comes from Luther's commentary on Jonah (1525). Jonah was a reluctant prophet. Having heard God's call, he headed the other direction—and ended up in the belly of the fish. Jonah was, for all practical purposes, dead. In this situation of great spiritual and bodily need, Jonah started to pray. As Luther noted in his commentary on Jonah 2:

For there was nothing else to do in such need of both body and soul but cry out. Our desires, our powers are nothing, just as Jonah here called out in pressing need. No merit was present, for he had sinned very seriously against the Lord. And so the only thing to do was to cry out, to cry out “to the Lord.” For the Lord is the only one to whom we must flee as to a sacred anchor and the only safety on those occasions when we think that we are done for.⁴⁶

Luther knew that the human tendency was not to pray to God but rather to remain sunk in despair and to seek another helper. Luther notes:

It is vain to lament and to bemoan your condition and to fret and to worry about your sad estate and to cast about for a helper. That will not extricate you from your woes; it will only drag you in deeper. Listen and hear what Jonah does.

Luther also pointed out that Jonah was a negative example—someone who delayed seeking help from God:

He, too, consumed himself a long time with his distress before he resorted to prayer . . . If he had not delayed, he would presumably have been delivered sooner. He also bids and teaches you not to emulate his example in this respect but he immediately states that he prayed and thus was granted deliverance.⁴⁷

Luther taught that we are to pray in all times of need, regardless of our own worthiness. But Luther also mentioned regular patterns for prayer too. In *A Simple Way to Pray* (1535) Luther gave much practical advice on prayer and recommended that prayer

be the first business of the morning and the last at night. Guard yourself carefully against those false, deluding ideas which tell you, ‘Wait a little while. I will pray in an hour; first I must attend to this or that.’ Such thoughts get you away from prayer into other affairs which so hold your attention and involve you that nothing comes of prayer for that day.⁴⁸

This echoes the advice given in his *Small Catechism* (1529) where Luther provided content and structure for a blessing or prayer “in the morning, as soon as you get out of bed” as well as an evening blessing “in the evening, when you go to bed.” He also advocated praying before and after meals.⁴⁹ Luther knew that set times and daily habits of prayer could be helpful to the Christian. As he wrote in the *Large Catechism* (1529):

Therefore from youth on we should form the habit of praying daily for our needs, whenever we are aware of anything that affects us or other people around us, such as preachers, magistrates, neighbors, and servants; and, as I have

said, we should always remind God of his commandment and promise . . . This I say because I would like to see people learn to pray properly and not act so crudely and coldly that they daily become more inept in praying. This is just what the devil wants . . .⁵⁰

8. *Prayer Never Replaces Action but Rather Enables and Includes Action.*

While some may claim that Christians should be out doing God's will rather than simply praying, Luther never saw these as alternatives: Look at his morning blessing in the *Small Catechism*. It includes saying the Lord's Prayer and a morning prayer. The end of it says ". . . you are to go to your work joyfully." Luther did not see the life of prayer as opposed to or precluding the life of action. Nor did he think that prayer should be left to a special "praying" group of people, namely, monastics. Rather prayer is embedded in the lives of all Christians. Remember too that the reality that we can ask God to change his revealed intentions in bodily matters here on earth says something about the connection between God's work and our work. It suggests that humans cooperate with God in shaping this world. For Luther, God wants us to fulfill our vocations and thereby to work through us—but he also wants to hear from us about how those vocations might be lived out. Clearly, the faithful and creative engagement in one's vocations was closely linked with a lively prayer attitude unafraid to ask God for what seems to contradict his will.

*Implications: What Kind of God is this?
And what about human suffering?*

Luther's discussion of prayer leads to other important questions. Luther sees prayer as telling us what sort of God we have, and what purpose suffering may have.

1. *Prayer Tells Us What Kind of God We Have—a God Who Hears Prayer.*

Those studying Luther have often emphasized that God is a speaking, active God who both commands and promises. But Luther recognized that this God is not involved in one-sided lecturing. Christian faith is not only about listening to brilliant sermons; it is

about talking back to God, praying, asking, complaining, beseeching. Luther understood God as constantly inviting and driving us to conversation.

For Luther, the very nature of God is defined by God's hearing of prayer. In his Jonah commentary, he noted, "For God cannot resist helping him who cries to Him and implores Him. His divine goodness cannot hold aloof; it must help and lend an ear."⁵¹ While commenting on Genesis 17, the story of God appearing to Abram, changing his name to Abraham, Luther made the point that God always grants more than we ask for or are able to understand.⁵² Abraham is content to have Ishmael, the son of his maid, as his heir. But God does something different, giving Abraham a son through his wife Sarah. For Luther, this story showed that God is generous—but it is about more than God's generosity. God's hearing of prayers even defines God's identity. Referring to Ephesians 3:20, Luther remarked, "God's title and true name is this, that He is a Hearer of prayers. But we . . . are called those who do not know how to pray or what to pray for."⁵³ Repeatedly he reminded his listeners that "we have a God who is able to give more than we understand or ask for." Our failing capacity to grasp this is not, and even our failing words are not barriers, for "Even though we do not know what we should ask for and how, nevertheless the Spirit of God, who dwells in the hearts of the godly, sighs and groans for us . . ."⁵⁴ Luther cited James, John, and Augustine's mother Monica as examples of people who did not know for what they prayed but who received far more.⁵⁵

God's hearing of prayer defines the very nature of God as a generous God, one who gives undeserved gifts. God hears because God has promised to hear, not because humans are worthy of a hearing. This, of course, parallels Luther's explanations of the Apostles' Creed, which emphasize the unmerited nature of the gifts we receive in creation, redemption, and sanctification. God hears not only his own dear Son but people like Jonah, Abraham, and Lot.

2. *Prayer Is Honest Talk About and in the Midst of Suffering.*

Luther thought prayer in times of distress absolutely crucial and a necessary exercise of faith. God wants to hear our prayer, so much

so that he sends events that drive us to pray. As Luther noted in his commentary on Psalm 118:

Let everyone know most assuredly and not doubt that God does not send him this distress to destroy him . . . He wants to drive him to pray, to implore, to fight, to exercise his faith, to learn another aspect of God's person than before, to accustom himself to do battle even with the devil and with sin, and by the grace of God to be victorious. Without this experience we could never learn the meaning of faith, the Word, Spirit, grace, sin, death, or the devil . . .⁵⁶

Suffering is an opportunity for prayer. Divine goodness is hidden from suffering humans. Rather than debate the whys of human suffering, Luther acknowledged the reality of suffering and the reality that people perceive that God is far away and involved only as a judging, punishing, and/or indifferent power. In the midst of this, Luther advocated the counter-intuitive: Luther urged the one suffering to flee to God, not from God. Rather than being awestruck by the majesty of God, and rather than fleeing from the God whom we perceive to be angry with us, Luther advocated that we speak up! We need to flee *to* the hidden God and there we will find the merciful God. Luther discussed this perceptively in his 1525 Jonah commentary.

Nature is far more adept at fleeing from God when He is angry and when He punishes . . . It always seeks help from other sources; it will have nothing of this God and cannot abide Him. Therefore human nature forever flees, and yet it does not escape but must thus remain condemned in wrath, sin, death, and hell. Here you can glimpse a goodly portion of hell . . .⁵⁷

Luther described hell as the situation of fleeing from God. Prayer does not come naturally to humans. By nature we cannot do what we should do—call upon God. We feel God's anger and punishment and see God as an angry tyrant, our enemy. But a drastic turn takes place: "Therefore when Jonah had advanced to the point of entreating God, he had gained the victory." Jonah's victory did not come when he was finally spit up from the belly of the fish, rather it came when he prayed. Luther drew this lesson:

And thus you, too, must be minded; thus you, too, must act. Do not cast your eyes down or take to your heels, but stand still, rise above this, and you will

discover the truth of the verse (Ps. 118:5): “Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me.” Take recourse to the Lord, yes, to the Lord, and to no other. Turn to the very One who is angry and punishes, and resort to no other. The Lord’s answer consists in this, that you will soon find your situation improved; you will soon perceive the wrath abating and the punishment lightened. God does not let you go unanswered so long as you can call upon Him, even if you can do no more than that.⁵⁸

For Luther, the logic of prayer is different from human logic. We flee to the God who seems to us angry and vengeful and there we find the attentive, merciful God.

3. *Prayer Makes a Difference.*

Because God stands ready to help, Luther can say, as he did in the Jonah commentary,

All depends on our calling and crying to Him. We dare not keep silent. Turn your gaze upward, raise your folded hands aloft, and pray forthwith: “come to my aid, God my Lord! Etc.,” and you will immediately find relief. If you can cry and supplicate, then there is no longer any reason for worry to abide. Even hell would not be hell or would not remain hell if its occupants could cry and pray to God.⁵⁹

Prayer changes reality: “Even hell would not be hell . . .”

4. *Some Prayers Are Not Answered, but Even Then God’s Care Is Evident.*

What about unanswered prayer? In his lectures on Deuteronomy,⁶⁰ published first in 1525, Luther used the story of Moses to teach about prayer that is, seemingly, “not heard” or “not answered.” Deuteronomy 3:24–25 records Moses’ request to the Lord when his people were at the brink of entering the Promised Land. Moses wanted to cross the Jordan and see the land. Moses’ request was not granted. God told him to go to the top of Pisgah and look over the Jordan but also said “you shall not cross over this Jordan.” Finally, God told him to encourage and strengthen Joshua. Luther asked, “Why is the prayer of Moses not heard, since it is likely that he prayed in the Spirit?” He answered:

This is written for our example and consolation. For even though the Lord does not hear him and this causes Moses to realize that He is angry with him,

as he says here, nevertheless He does not desert him; He commands him to climb the mountain and view the land, and to give orders to Joshua.

Luther draws a conclusion from the story: “. . . let us in no wise doubt that we are favored by, and dear to God; and let us grasp at the favor beneath the wrath, lest we lose heart.”⁶¹ Moses is not heard, that is, his request is not granted. Yet Luther acknowledged implicitly that Moses is heard and that beneath God’s wrath toward Moses lies favor. In the midst of God’s rejection of our requests, we are to have confidence that we are favored by God and dear to God. Grasping at the favor beneath the wrath will cause us not to lose heart.

Conclusion

Although Luther’s reformation of prayer was often overlooked in the past, today historians are showing growing interest in prayer as part of their attention to matters of “popular piety.” In previous generations, many historians had not seen “popular piety” as important, preferring instead to focus on Luther’s great theological treatises, on his disputations, and on other writings that express Luther’s great theological insights. But Luther knew the importance of “popular piety.” Luther knew well he had to reform that piety. He could not let his movement remain at the level of university disputations or learned treatises if he expected it to “stick” or have staying power. He spent a lot of time and effort on various attempts to reform the ways that ordinary people understood and gave expression to their faith. He reformed the worship service, wrote hymns, wrote catechisms, taught prayer, and advocated new approaches to consoling the dying. Such examples could be multiplied. Careful attention to these “popular” pieces can teach us how Luther’s insights were transmitted to ordinary people, that is, how Luther sought to shape his message so it could be heard by them. It can tell us much about how the Reformation actually functioned among ordinary people.

Luther believed in a God who speaks and is in dialog with his people. Rather than the distant ineffable God who has charted out everything ahead of time and is only waiting to carry it out (a concept of God popular in American culture), Luther painted a picture

of a God bending down to speak with and to hear humans. Luther's God may choose to change his intentions in order to accommodate human requests. This God is not immovable but rather so eager to hear from us that he not only commands us to pray and promises to hear us but even offers examples of when he changed to accommodate us. This is not a God who has predestined every event, making it useless to pray. Rather God actively seeks our input. This is also not a God who merely wants to hear about minor matters but rather encourages prayer about important matters.

Today people hear many words but long for authentic words and authentic relationships. They ask whether they can trust what they hear and whether they can trust that anyone will hear what they say. This longing for authentic communication is part of the longing for relationship. The church can help people identify that this longing includes a longing for God. When we say that prayer—bold, honest, even crass prayer—is one of the signs of the church, we are saying that God both speaks and listens—and his church (not the four walls but rather the people assembled by God's Word) is the place for both listening and speaking. Words matter. Both God's Word and our words. Luther can teach us a lively sense of God's Word to us and our words in response—and lead us to ponder what would happen if we take seriously that God is in conversation with us.

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NOTES

1. *Luther's Works*. Eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, vols. 1–55; Christopher Boyd Brown, vols. 56–80 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955–1986), 14:60–61 (Hereafter cited as LW). *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1980) (hereafter, WA), 31:96.

2. Oswald Bayer has noted the significance of prayer for Luther's theology. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 346. The final chapter, "Promise and Prayer," discusses Luther's understanding of prayer. An entire volume of Albrecht Peters' five-volume commentary on

Luther's catechisms is devoted to the Lord's Prayer. Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen Band 3: Das Vaterunser* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992). Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Lord's Prayer*, trans. Daniel Thies (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011). Other resources on Luther and prayer include: Matthias Mikoteit, *Theologie und Gebet bei Luther: Untersuchungen zur Psalmenvorlesung 1532–1535* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004); Gerhard Ebeling, "Beten als Wahrnehmen der Wirklichkeit des Menschen, wie Luther es lehrte und lebte," *Lutherjahrbuch* 66 (1999), 151–66; Martin Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1985); Frieder Schulz, *Die Gebete Luthers: Edition, Bibliographie und Wirkungsgeschichte* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1976); Vilmos Vajta, "Luther als Beter," in *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546, Festgabe zu seinem 500. Geburtstag* ed. Helmar Junghans (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983), 1:279–295; Rudolf Damerau, *Luthers Gebetslehre* (2 vols; Marburg: Im Selbstverlag, 1975–77); William R. Russell, *Praying for Reform: Luther, Prayer, and the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005); Timothy Wengert, "Luther on Prayer in the Large Catechism," in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 171–97.

3. LW 43:11; WA 10/2:375.

4. *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen*, LW 42:15–81. *Auslegung deutsch des Vaterunser*, WA 2:(74) 80–130.

5. *Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des XVI. Jahrhunderts* [VD 16] (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich; Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel; Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1983–) L4046–4068.

6. LW 43:219–41. *Vermahnung zum Gebet wider den Türken*, WA 51:(577) 585–625.

7. LW 42:83–93. *Ein Sermon von dem Gebet und Prozession in der Kreuzwoche*, WA 2:(172), 175–79. VD 16 L6325–L6339.

8. VD16 L4081–L4124.

9. Commenting on the city of Strasbourg, Miriam Usher Chrisman wrote, "The most popular prayerbook, of which five editions were printed between 1560 and 1591, was Luther's own *Betbüchlein* . . ." Miriam Usher Chrisman, *Lay Culture, Learned Culture: Books and Social Change in Strasbourg, 1480–1599* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 88.

10. VD 16 L1934–1943.

11. See Luther's Preface to Cruciger's *Summer Postil* (1544), LW 77:9; WA 21:201. "So also the shameful, false, slanderous prayer books, of which the world was full, have been cleared out, and in place of them pure prayers and good Christian hymns have been published, especially the Psalter, the finest and most precious prayer book and hymnal of them all, concerning which no theologian of our time could boast that he had understood a single psalm as well and as thoroughly as the laypeople, men and women, understand them now."

12. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 441. (Hereafter, Kolb/Wengert.)

13. Paul W. Robinson, "Luther's Explanation of Daily Bread in Light of Medieval Preaching," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 435–47. Albrecht Peters traced the change in Luther's understanding of "bread" in the fourth petition. Prior to 1523, Luther understood "bread" as Christ, the bread of life, the food for the soul; beginning in 1523 he gives physical bread a broader place and by 1528 actual bread, the meeting of physical needs, is paramount. Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Lord's Prayer*, 124–30. See also Rudolf

Dellsperger, "Unser tägliches Brot. . . Die Brotbitte bei Erasmus von Rotterdam, Martin Luther, Wolfgang Musculus und Petrus Canisius SJ" in *Oratio: Das Gebet in patristischer und reformatorischer Sicht*, eds. Emidio Campi, Leif Grane, and Adolf Martin Ritter (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 211–26.

14. Kolb/Wengert, 357.
15. LW 43:219–41, WA 51:(577) 585–625.
16. LW 14:47, WA 31/1:69.
17. LW 14:51–56, WA 31/1:77–88.
18. See Mary Jane Haemig, "Prayer as Talking back to God in Luther's Genesis Lectures" *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (2009): 270–95.
19. LW 3:12; WA 42:557.
20. LW 3:12; WA 42:557.
21. LW 3:15; WA 42:559.
22. LW 3:15; WA 42:559.
23. LW 3:17; WA 42:560.
24. LW 3:234; WA 43:43.
25. LW 3:235; WA 43:43.
26. LW 3:235; WA 43:44.
27. LW 3:289; WA 43:82.
28. LW 3:289–90; WA 43:82.
29. LW 3:291; WA 43:83.
30. LW 3:291; WA 43:83–84.
31. Mary Jane Haemig, "Praying amidst Life's Perils: How Luther used Biblical examples to teach prayer," *Seminary Ridge Review* 13:2 (Spring 2011): 25–40.
32. WA 52:742. "Also soll es mit dir auch gehen, ob gleych Got mit der hilfff verziehen oder auszbleyben wu(e)rde."
33. Kolb/Wengert, 440–41.
34. LW 30:324; WA 30:793.
35. LW 14:61; WA 31/1:97.
36. LW 42:21; WA 2:82.
37. Kolb/Wengert, 443.
38. Martin Luther, *Eine einfältige Weise zu beten für einen guten Freund* WA 38:353–75; *A Simple Way to Pray*, LW 43:193–211.
39. LW 43:200; WA 38:364–65.
40. LW 43:209; WA 38:372.
41. LW 3:288–89; WA 43:81–82.
42. For a discussion of how Jehoshaphat's prayer was used by sixteenth-century Lutherans, see Mary Jane Haemig, "Jehoshaphat and his prayer among sixteenth-century Lutherans," *Church History* 73 (September 2004): 522–35.
43. LW 46:173–174; WA 30/2:119–20.
44. Kolb/Wengert, 352.
45. LW 3:17–18; WA 42:561.
46. LW 19:16–17; WA 13:249.
47. LW 19:71; WA 19:221–22.
48. LW 43:193; WA 38:359.
49. Kolb/Wengert, 363–64.

50. Kolb/Wengert, 444.
51. LW 19:71; WA 19:221–22.
52. LW 3:157; WA 42:661.
53. LW 3:158; WA 42:661.
54. LW 3:159; WA 42:662.
55. LW 3:159; WA 42:662.
56. LW 14:60; WA 31/1:95.
57. LW 19:71–72; WA 19:221–22.
58. LW 19:72; WA 19: 222–23.
59. LW 19:71; WA 19:222.
60. LW 9; WA 14:497–744.
61. LW 9:42; WA 14:578–79.