

March

This month we read the conclusion to Luther's most daunting work, *The Bondage of the Will*, in which Luther walks believers through the lights of nature and grace to await in faith the light of glory in which God's justice will be evident, if only already now we trust that it will be so on the basis of the light of grace.

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God is incomparable, that means that there is none like God; it further means that God eternally is and remains beyond the *comprehension* of the creature. "Comprehension" in this context means to see and grasp from every possible angle so as to be able to control, manipulate and predict the phenomenon. To say that God is incomprehensible, or "inscrutable," as Paul puts in Romans 11:33, is to say something that applies in principle only to the one, true God. The flip side of that acknowledgment, then, is that everything else in the world is in principle comprehensible. This theological conviction led to the rise of the modern scientific world view, particularly on the soil of the Lutheran reformation.

Interestingly, this double-sided conviction about God the Creator's incomparability and the comprehensibility of the creation is something that creatures come in faith to *understand*. "Understanding" means in this connection not the kind of knowledge we have in scientific comprehension of phenomena but the capacity to recognize and identify a phenomenon sufficiently well that one may work practically with it. This pragmatic knowledge of God's uniqueness or incomparability that makes God incomprehensible theoretically but nonetheless followable and understandable practically is not the product of philosophical reflection; it is the gift given with God's self-donation and self-communication in the gospel. "No one has ever seen God, but the only Son, who is in the Father's bosom, has made Him known" (John 1:18).

Thus, we understand and trust so that we can follow; we do not comprehend in a way that removes the need for trust now or for wonder eternally. Even in the light of glory when faith gives way to sight and we shall know even as we have been known, we never comprehend God. Rather God will be eternally fascinating, a mystery never to be fully plumbed. But we can already now in faith understand and follow.

We these distinctions, Luther asked and answered the burning questions of theodicy (about the justice of God) at the conclusion of the brilliant but vexing treatise, *The Bondage of the Will*. He exclaimed: "To think that we cannot for a little while *believe* that He is just, when He has actually promised us that when He reveals His glory we shall clearly *see* that He both was and is

just!” Luther does not disregard the question of theodicy. He knows his Old Testament all too well for that. He knows that the question about God’s justice (that is, about the apparent lack of God’s justice in our experience of this fallen and groaning world), rages like a devouring fire in the hearts of believers who doubt as also in doubters who would like to believe. But Luther does think that the only adequate theodicy, like God speaking to Job out of the whirlwind, is the one that God will provide on His great and glorious day when He reveals His justice. Then, with Israel, “we shall know that He is the Lord.”

In the meantime, we have to focus the question in terms of the uniqueness of God, who is not like anything else in all His creation. Modern scholarship has taught us that the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH alone!” (*not* the older translation, “YHWH is one”), is best understood as a henotheistic, not monotheistic confession. Henotheism (adherence to one God) means that in a world awash with gods, idols and demonic powers claiming authority and saving power, Israel is wed to YHWH alone, who brought Israel up out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. The sense of the claim, then, is that only YHWH saves in this way of the Exodus, so that adherence to other gods will lead back into bondage.

Only later in Israel’s journey with God—in the trauma of the exile, when Israel learned that she depended on YHWH to exist, not YHWH on her—did henotheism from the Exodus mature into an articulate post-exilic monotheism, that is, into the belief that there is only one, true God, that other so called gods are imposters. As we see in the preaching of the second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55), for example, YHWH claims this title of the one, true God, the Creator of all that is not God. God is God who is strictly speaking incomparable, not part of the created world but rather its creator, not then like anything we know in the world, truly a God who hides himself.

Luther the Old Testament scholar grasped these things. The incomparable one, true God is inaccessible and incomprehensible to the light of nature, for we can by nature only understand what is somehow like what we already know within the cosmos, other creatures like ourselves coming into being and passing away again. We naturally reason here by analogies and similitudes, going from the greater known to the lesser known; for example, think of an American returning from the UK explaining to another American, “Cricket is like baseball.”

Now, Luther argues in our text today from the *Bondage of the Will*, if we think in this accustomed natural way strictly on the basis of the evidence of creaturely experience, we are driven by the light of nature, if not to silence before the daunting question mark of God, then to blasphemy or atheism. For by the light of nature, without blinders or illusions or mystifications, it seems that the one, true God works all in all without discrimination, like the dharma of the Buddhists or the two-faced Shiva of the Hindus, both killing and making alive without any apparent order of justice or purpose. If we take it personally, in the light of nature God seems like a malicious devil; if we take it impersonally as luck or chance, we can perhaps handle

adversities with greater serenity but we are condemned to live out our lucky or unlucky lives in an objectively hopeless cosmos, humanly speaking. If we take it as dharma, on the other hand, we are condemned to expend great effort to liberate ourselves from the cycle of endlessly repeated sufferings. All this “light of nature” which is darkness concerning God Luther packs into a few terse words!

The monotheistic claim to truth –that it is the saving Lord of the Exodus who is the one, true God—comes as a light shining in the darkness concerning God, then, as a *promise* to be held and trusted in faith by the light of grace, patiently awaiting its confirmation in the light of glory. It is the claim that at last the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, that YHWH who liberates the oppressed will prove to be the one, true God.

This promise of the reign of God was the substance of Jesus’ preaching of the coming near of God’s kingdom and of His own Messianic claim already now to inaugurate its reality in those glorious moments of epiphany: the forgiveness of sins, the healing of the sick, the liberation of the possessed, the raising of the dead. In Jesus, we are given a glimpse of the light of glory, summed up in the Transfiguration of our Lord. This glimpse of future glory now is what Luther calls the light of grace. If the light of nature had cast doubt on whether God cares for us, the light of grace demonstrates God’s care in Easter and the Exodus, just as it points us forward to glory as the confirmation of this divine care for us. Hence Luther’s potent conclusion, following Paul in Romans 8: *“There is a life after this life; and all that is not punished and repaid here will be punished and repaid there; for this life is nothing more than a precursor, or, rather, a beginning, of the life that is to come.”*

The motif of punishment is central to Luther’s biblical theology. The scoundrels who have usurped the earth with malice and injustice will not get away with murder. The righteous who live by faith active in love and hope for the groaning earth will in turn be vindicated. The mature Luther does not reject the theology of glory, then, but rather sees that glory remains future, and is only paradoxically (*sub contrario*, under the opposite appearance), present to us now as a promise attested in Christ’s self-donation, then, as a glimpse, a sign, for seeing, as in a mirror, enigmatically.

We need to stress what is technically called *inaugurated* eschatology, that in Christ’s death and resurrection God inaugurates the coming glory, so that believers baptized in Christ live in the creative tension between the already of their justification by faith and the not yet of their final vindication. Despite the justified attention in the 20th century to the early Luther’s theology of the cross in which he apparently repudiated the theology of glory, the fact is that Luther left behind this early experiment of the theology of the cross after 1519. He left it behind, most likely, for the very good rhetorical reason that his language about the cross could suggest, contrary to his intentions, that one merits God’s approval by works of self-hatred.

Luther matured to the stance that God indeed kills –that is the theology of the cross—but *in order to* make alive, that is, to give hope of glory, that the baptized might already now walk in newness of life. Unless this *purpose clause* prevails victoriously in our preaching and theology, giving us a glimpse of the glory to be revealed that is not worthy to be compared to the sufferings of this present age, the theology of the cross works nothing but despair and death. If that is all that it does, it is the work of the devil, not of God. In this light, the problem of the theology of glory is not its promise of health, healing and wholeness but only that it imagines that we are already in heaven, that we have already arrived, that we have nothing further to expect from our saving Lord. But the risen Christ must reign until he subdues all enemies under his feet. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death. So the Easter preacher following Luther will so proclaim the light of grace that living now in hope for the light of glory becomes liberating newness of life.

An Excerpt From

The Bondage of the Will

By: Martin Luther

For my own part, I frankly confess that even if it were possible, I should not wish to have free choice given to me, or to have anything left in my own hands by which I might strive toward salvation. For, on the one hand, I should be unable to stand firm and keep hold of it amid so many adversities and perils and so many assaults of demons, seeing that even one demon is mightier, than all men, and no man at all could be saved; and on the other hand, even if there were no perils or adversities or demons, I should nevertheless have to labor under perpetual uncertainty and to fight as one beating the air, since even if I lived and worked to eternity, my conscience would never be assured and certain how much it ought to do to satisfy God. For whatever work might be accomplished, there would always remain an anxious doubt whether it pleased God or whether he required something more, as the experience of all self-justifiers proves, and as I myself learned to my bitter cost through so many years. But now, since God has taken my salvation out of my hands into his, making it depend on his choice and not mine, and has promised to save me, not by my own work or exertion but by his grace and mercy, I am assured and certain both that he is faithful and will not lie to me, and also that he is too great and powerful for any demons or any adversities to be able to break him or to snatch me from him. “No one,” he says, “shall snatch them out of my hand, because my Father who has given them to me is greater than all” [John 10:28 f.]. So it comes about that, if not all, some and

indeed many are saved, whereas by the power of free choice none at all would be saved, but all would perish together. Moreover, we are also certain and sure that we please God, not by the merit of our own working, but by the favor of his mercy promised to us, and that if we do less than we should or do it badly, he does not hold this against us, but in a fatherly way pardons and corrects us. Hence the glorying of all the saints in their God.

[The Mercy and Justice of God in the Light of Nature, Grace, and Glory]

Now, if you are disturbed by the thought that it is difficult to defend the mercy and justice of God when he damns the undeserving, that is to say, ungodly men who are what they are because they were born in ungodliness and can in no way help being and remaining ungodly and damnable, but are compelled by a necessity of nature to sin and to perish (as Paul says: “We were all children of wrath like the rest,” since they are created so by God himself from seed corrupted by the sin of the one man Adam)—rather must God be honored and revered as supremely merciful toward those whom he justifies and saves, supremely unworthy as they are, and there must be at least some acknowledgement of his divine wisdom so that he may be believed to be righteous where he seems to us to be unjust. For if his righteousness were such that it could be judged to be righteous by human standards, it would clearly not be divine and would in no way differ from human righteousness. But since he is the one true God, and is wholly incomprehensible and inaccessible to human reason, it is proper and indeed necessary that his righteousness also should be incomprehensible, as Paul also says where he exclaims: “O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!” But they would not be incomprehensible if we were able in every instance to grasp how they are righteous. What is man, compared with God? How much is there within our power compared with his power? What is our strength in comparison with his resources? What is our knowledge compared with his wisdom? What is our substance over against his substance? In a word, what is our all compared with his?

If, therefore, we confess, as even nature teaches, that human power, strength, wisdom, substance, and everything we have, is simply nothing at all in comparison with divine power, strength, wisdom, knowledge, and substance, what is this perversity that makes us attack God’s righteousness and judgment only, and make such claims for our own judgment as to wish to comprehend, judge, and evaluate the divine judgment? Why do we not take a similar line here too, and say, “Our judgment is nothing in comparison with the divine judgment”? Ask Reason herself whether she is not convinced and compelled to confess that she is foolish and rash in not allowing the judgment of God to be incomprehensible, when she admits that everything else divine is incomprehensible. In all other matters we grant God his divine majesty, and only in respect of his judgment are we prepared to deny it. We cannot for a while believe that he is

righteous, even though he has promised us that when he reveals his glory we shall all both see and feel that he has been and is righteous.

I will give an example to confirm this faith and console that evil eye which suspects God of injustice. As you can see, God so orders this corporal world in its external affairs that if you respect and follow the judgment of human reason, you are bound to say either that there is no God or that God is unjust. As the poet says: "Oft I am moved to think there are no gods!"³⁸ For look at the prosperity the wicked enjoy and the adversity the good endure, and note how both proverbs and that parent of proverbs, experience, testify that the bigger the scoundrel the greater his luck. "The tents of the ungodly are at peace," says Job [Job 12:6], and Psalm 72[73:12] complains that the sinners of the world increase in riches. Tell me, is it not in everyone's judgment most unjust that the wicked should prosper and the good suffer? But that is the way of the world. Here even the greatest minds have stumbled and fallen, denying the existence of God and imagining that all things are moved at random by blind Chance or Fortune. So, for example, did the Epicureans and Pliny; while Aristotle, in order to preserve that Supreme Being of his from unhappiness, never lets him look at anything but himself, because he thinks it would be most unpleasant for him to see so much suffering and so many injustices. The prophets, however, who did believe in God, had more temptation to regard him as unjust—Jeremiah, for instance, and Job, David, Asaph, and others. What do you suppose Demosthenes³⁹ and Cicero⁴⁰ thought, when after doing all they could they were rewarded with so tragic a death?

Yet all this, which looks so very like injustice in God, and which has been represented as such with arguments that no human reason or light of nature can resist, is very easily dealt with in the light of the gospel and the knowledge of grace, by which we are taught that although the ungodly flourish in their bodies, they lose their souls. In fact, this whole insoluble problem finds a quick solution in one short sentence, namely, that there is a life after this life, and whatever has not been punished and rewarded here will be punished and rewarded there, since this life is nothing but an anticipation, or rather, the beginning of the life to come.

If, therefore, the light of the gospel, shining only through the Word and faith, is so effective that this question which has been discussed in all ages and never solved is so easily settled and put aside, what do you think it will be like when the light of the Word and of faith comes to an end, and reality itself and the Divine Majesty are revealed in their own light? Do you not think that the light of glory will then with the greatest of ease be able to solve the problem that is insoluble in the light of the Word or of grace, seeing that the light of grace has so easily solved the problem that was insoluble in the light of nature?

Let us take it that there are three lights—the light of nature, the light of grace, and the light of glory, to use the common and valid distinction. By the light of nature it is an insoluble problem

how it can be just that a good man should suffer and a bad man prosper; but this problem is solved by the light of grace. By the light of grace it is an insoluble problem how God can damn one who is unable by any power of his own to do anything but sin and be guilty. Here both the light of nature and the light of grace tell us that it is not the fault of the unhappy man, but of an unjust God; for they cannot judge otherwise of a God who crowns one ungodly man freely and apart from merits, yet damns another who may well be less, or at least not more, ungodly. But the light of glory tells us differently, and it will show us hereafter that the God whose judgment here is one of incomprehensible righteousness is a God of most perfect and manifest righteousness. In the meantime, we can only *believe* this, being admonished and confirmed by the example of the light of grace, which performs a similar miracle in relation to the light of nature.

¹Luther, M. (1999, c1972). *Vol. 33: Luther's works, vol. 33 : Career of the Reformer III* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Vol. 33, Page 288-293). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.