

A Word to Sheepdogs

FOREWORD

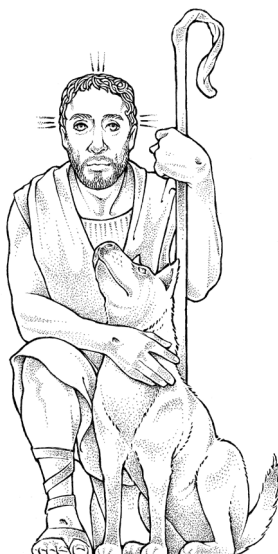
Most of us are wimps when it comes to suffering. We should know better, for Jesus warned us ahead of time: “In the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). Paul — no stranger to hardship himself — wrote that everyone who wants to know Jesus and the power of his resurrection must also share in the fellowship of his sufferings (Phil 3:10).

Yet we are not masochists. Pain isn’t fun, and it’s okay to do all we can to alleviate it. So most pastors when confronted with human misery have the innate instinct to jump in and solve it.

Tyler Arnold knows better. The pages below are laced with quotes from theologians down through the centuries who know better, too. You don’t solve suffering for people; you comfort them with the consolations of the Sufferer in Chief: Jesus Christ our Lord.

It’s clear that Pastor Arnold has kept vigil with countless saints in the midst of their suffering over the decades of his ministry as one of Jesus’ sheepdogs. He writes as one who knows the burden of that suffering in his own life. He knows how to bravely enter into a world of hurt bearing not merely the measly salve of human empathy, but the rich balm of the consolation of the presence of Christ Jesus himself. When the chips are down in their lives, suffering people need an empathetic ear, that’s for sure. But more than that, they need Jesus.

In this essay you will learn how to more confidently bring Jesus to suffering souls by the word you speak and sacraments you administer. Ponder these pages and find your own personal comfort. Then comfort others in Jesus’ name with the comfort by which you yourself have been comforted.



Rev. Dr. Harold L. Senkbeil

Pastoral Care in Light of Suffering and the Theology of the Cross

Rev. Dr. Tyler C. Arnold

Introduction

Pastoral care is a daunting yet splendid task. Strictly speaking, it always remains unfinished business until the Lord's *parousia* arrives when all the faithful are translated to the church triumphant. In the meantime, pastors are constantly challenged to comfort sorrowful hearts; and since suffering remains an ever-present constant in this fallen world, pastoral care constantly seeks to address specific maladies and misbeliefs related to suffering.

Martin Luther's theology of the cross couples the sufferings of God's people and the incarnate Savior by articulating how Christ comes to suffer with and for his beloved people. A proper understanding and application of the theology of the cross is integral to effective pastoral care for sufferers as God's sufferings become part and parcel to those of his creation. There is no comfort to be found when God is hidden (*deus absconditus*) from sight amid great distress: the effective care of souls depends on applying the "revealed God" (*deus revelatus*) in Christ, who is ever-present with the one who is suffering.¹ Pastoral care reveals the true condition of the soul and connects the sufferer to the sufferings of Christ revealed in the Scriptures by applying the means of grace. Exposing maladies that challenge the soul guides the application of the gospel. The theology of the cross does not begin within the heights of God's righteousness, but rather in the depths of man's despair. It does not

reside within the obscurity of abstract concepts, but in the concrete enfleshment of God who has come near to rescue.

Suffering

Suffering is present everywhere, yet rarely understood. Many cope by denying its very existence or "regulating it to a status of the ontically unreal, the merely apparent."² This approach places suffering — physical and spiritual — in the realm of the fundamentally unreal and unsubstantiated. Pastors, however, know all too well how suffering afflicts God's people in very real ways. Suffering is not merely perceived, but experienced — a lived-in reality that cripples the soul. Since today's world often sees suffering as completely foreign to God and his work, human beings end up assuming a theology that attempts to avoid pain and suffering rather than embracing it as an act of God's hidden will. Suffering is not understood to be God's central purpose, but it remains as integral to it as God determines.

Those affected by suffering know that it cannot be avoided. Its ever-present reality is no mirage but a lived experience that severely afflicts the human condition and emotions. Those who undergo it want answers and explanations. Gregory Schulz borrows from Nicholas Wolterstorff³ and calls this the shout of No...

¹ A helpful study is Pless, *Martin Luther, Preacher of the Cross*, 59.

² Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering an Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 35.

³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 96.

...by nerves and gut and gland and heart to pain to death. Suffering is injustice and abandonment... Suffering is not simply being in pain or being sympathetic to those who are in pain. It is a complaint, a lament about the wrongness of pain. Suffering is indeed the shout of No! But it isn't a cry into a void. For us Christians, it is a shout and a cry to God. He is God. He is almighty. And yet, look at these great evils in our lives. No, Lord it isn't right!⁴

The shout of No is the call by God's people to stop the pain and end the suffering. But as long as the sources of sin, the fallen world and devil remain, the problem of suffering cannot be solved: therefore, it is to be endured. This is the realm in which pastors are given to minister. We have no other alternative than to meet suffering head-on in the lives of others, addressing its reality. We are not called to solve the problem of suffering, but to minister to those who bear it. We don't explain it; we listen to those burdened by it.

Suffering with God

God may not explain suffering; but better, he shares in it. Jeremiah cries out, "O Lord, you know; remember me and visit me..." (Jer 15:15). He calls to his God who not only knows suffering but comes and dwells with him in it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that only a suffering God can help.⁵ Christ's dying was lingering and slow, much like the despair that loiters in the lives of those whose sufferings are constantly before them. In the midst of suffering, knowledge of its cause is far less significant than having a God who comes to be with us and relieve it.

Suffering is a "with" condition, always

⁴ Gregory P. Schulz, *The Problem of Suffering: A Father's Hope* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 17.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2011), 134.

crouching at the door of human hearts.⁶ For this reason, God entered into the world through the incarnation and is in full communion with his creation. This condition reveals a Christ that must suffer, because suffering is the condition of those in relation to whom God would be "Emmanuel." If God desires to achieve solidarity with us, he must become a suffering God since his creation does the same. Douglas Hall portrays two ways that God and Christians keep company in suffering: conforming and confirming. Hall says:

If we suffer with him we may truly belong to his company. If we suffer with him, we may rejoice, knowing that we are participants in the reconciling work that God is achieving through him, knowing that we are part of the story. Suffering, in short, is both *conformatio* (the mode of our being conformed to the new identity) and *confirmatio* (our confirmation of membership in His body).⁷

Luther alludes to the Christian life as *conformatio* and *confirmatio* in Christ's sufferings is alluded to in a slightly different way in a sermon he preached a day after his arrival at Feste Coburg, where he stayed during the Diet of Augsburg. In light of Colossians 1:24,⁸ Luther says:

It is as if he (St. Paul) were saying: His whole Christendom is not fully completed; we too must follow after in order that none of this suffering of Christ may be lacking or lost, but all brought together into one. Therefore every Christian must be aware that suffering will not fail to come.

...Then what is needed is to hold fast and submit oneself to it, as I have said,

⁶ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 33.

⁷ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 143.

⁸ "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church..." (ESV)

namely, that one knows that we must suffer, in order that we may thus be conformed to Christ, and that it cannot be otherwise, that everyone must have his cross and suffering.⁹

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Christ himself suffers
for us and with us.*

Though suffering does not contribute to one's own righteousness, it is inextricably connected to the Christian life. A "completing" of suffering is necessary because we cannot separate our life from the life of Christ, who suffered. The *conformatio* into Christ's identity and the *confirmatio* into his holy body, means that our suffering is not in vain. We have a promise attached to our afflictions since Christ suffers with us. And we have the promise that our sufferings "in" and "with" Christ will, "work for His good and that Christ, for His Word's sake, will not only help us bear this suffering but also turn and transform it to our advantage."¹⁰ God is active amid suffering to confirm and conform us into the image of his dear Son, so that we may be like him in this world and in the life to come. Therefore, Christian suffering is better and nobler because Christ himself suffers for us and with us. He has "hallowed" the suffering of all his children by engrafting us into the suffering of Jesus.¹¹ We should not despair that suffering is part of our lives. God has made this affliction a grand thing by promising that he

⁹ AE 51:198–199.

¹⁰ AE 51:200. Luther goes on to say, "And again, what makes this cross more agreeable and bearable for us is the fact that our dear God is ready to pour so many refreshing aromatics and cordials into our hearts that we are able to bear all our afflictions and tribulations..."

¹¹ AE 51:208. Luther also says, "Through the suffering of Christ, the suffering of all his saints has become utterly holy, for it has been touched with Christ's suffering. Therefore we should accept all suffering as a holy thing, for it is truly holiness.

works through it for good.¹²

Luther teaches that joy comes by means of faith and hope through God grafting himself to believers in times of affliction. During these times, the sufferer needs to be patient and wait for God's help. This is easier said than done, yet within these times God is testing, teaching and strengthening the soul.¹³ In a letter to Queen Maria of Hungary, younger sister of Emperor Charles V and King Ferdinand of Austria, Luther comforts a noblewoman who has lost her husband (King Louis II), mourns that she was childless, and is stricken with a grave illness. Luther reminds her that God remains ours when we lose all else:

What does it matter then, if body and life, father and mother, brothers, kingdom, crown, honour, wealth and anything else one could mention pass away? For if God's grace remains ours, then God is our Father and His Son is our Brother, and His heaven and creation is our inheritance, and all the angels and saints are our brothers, cousins and sisters. So even if we lose everything, we have, after all, lost less than a halfpenny's worth, even if we have no kingdom, heaven or earth, we still have God himself and eternal life!¹⁴

For Luther, the loss of all things is trivial

¹² St. John Chrysostom says, "How then does He say, 'my yoke is easy, and my burden is light'? For if the road is narrow and difficult, how can He also call it light and easy? He says one thing because of the nature of the trials, but the other because of the willingness of the travelers. It is possible for even what is unendurable by nature to become light when we accept it with eagerness; just as the apostles who had been scourged returned rejoicing that they had been found worthy to be dishonored for the name of the Lord. The nature of the torments indeed ordinarily brings tribulation and distress, but the willingness of those who were scourged and conquered even the nature of their sufferings. St. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 67.

¹³ See Pietsch, *Of Good Comfort*, 62.

¹⁴ Pietsch, *Of Good Comfort*, 268.

compared to what the Christian gains in Christ. The cross draws our eyes toward it, not only to show us a Lord who loves us enough to die for us, but also to show us a Lord who knows the same pangs of death we do. We may feel alone, stricken, smitten and afflicted by God; or deafened by the silence of God when times are at their worst. Yet, in our life wrought with despair God gives us hope through the medicine of immortality, by giving himself completely into our somber and sin-tainted existence. In his *Handbook of Consolations*, Johann Gerhard says:

You must gaze with the eye of the heart upon Christ hanging on the cross; you must hope for and draw out the medicine for your wounds from His wounds; you must recline upon Him with a true and faithful heart; and you must as it were, wrap yourself in His most holy merit. This is the voice of true faith: Look upon me, you who hang on a wooden cross for me, and may all my sins lie hid in your side. My troubled mind longs for you; forgive my guilt: by my sin I die, but by your blood I live.¹⁵

Affliction deafens those who suffer, leaving them thinking they are alone. Yet the voice of the believer speaks, as Gerhard would say: “Look upon me. Remember me, be present with me and give me your all-sustaining comfort and grace. Look at me, Jesus,” says the afflicted; “and most of all, redeem me from this transitory life.”

The Necessity of Suffering

Many perceive suffering to mean the absence of God and the enemy of faith, and many in the church nod to the worldly notion that Christians are to avoid suffering whenever possible, ignore it, and even deny it since suffering brings pain and nothing positive. However, suffering and

despair are honest expressions of God’s will, though beyond our understanding. They are not to be relegated to the sidelines of faith and life, nor do they indicate God’s loss of control over evil.¹⁶

Suffering, rather, is necessary for the body of Christ, and it is an indispensable mark of its authenticity. No doubt there is suffering in God’s beloved world, yet God is still at work. If suffering is necessary, then God must have a purpose for it. According to Luther, God checks wickedness through suffering. “Hence he must keep disciplining and driving us, that our faith may increase and grow stronger and thus bring the Savior more deeply into our hearts.”¹⁷ While the world sees no intrinsic value in suffering and with it, an absence of God’s favor, Luther describes how it is necessary for the Christian. The Christian should not be afraid of suffering and affliction because it is far better to have a cross than to be without one. Crosses become the lens through which Christians understand suffering since Jesus himself bore the cross. Luther says, “Besides, the gospel cannot come to the fore except through and in suffering and cross.”¹⁸

We do not choose our own sufferings, as the fanatics do, says Luther.¹⁹ God would not have us choose our own sufferings so that we flaunt them by showing others what fine and admirable sufferings we have, and thus make them meritorious. Sufferings earn us nothing, yet God is pleased that we suffer in order to be conformed to Christ. Therefore, the Christian does not dictate or choose his own suffering

¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann says, “We have believed that faith does not mean to acknowledge and embrace negativity. We have thought that acknowledgment of negativity was somehow and act of unfaith, as though the very speech about it conceded too much about God’s ‘loss of control.’” Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 52.

¹⁷ AE 51:207.

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¹⁹ AE 51:199

¹⁵ Gerhard, *Handbook of Consolations*, 19.

but rather patiently endures what God sees fit to give.

The life of the Christian is cruciform, typifying Christ's life in good works toward others and also in sufferings. That which the world seeks to avoid becomes a mark of those whose lives are lived by grace through faith. Christians hold fast to suffering by submitting to Christ, his cross and suffering. There is no other way to be conformed to him.

Lament

The psalms of lament give words to the sufferer who may not know what to say to God; and when God's afflicted people stand before him in the Divine Service, lament is a significant part of worship. However, today many Christian forms of worship reflect the Lord's triumph, but ignore the very reason why God needed to enact victory on behalf of his creation in the first place. "The Psalms with their elements of lament, confusion, and the intrusion of death into life, have been too often replaced not by songs that capture the same sensibilities but by those that assert triumph over death while never really giving death its due."²⁰ The resurrection remains central in exclaiming the Lord's complete victory, but Christian worship today often ignores the reason why the tomb of Jesus had to be occupied in the first place. Lament thrusts the Christian into a negative theology where God is found in the opposites.²¹ Instead of being recognized by divine acceptance and blessedness associated with God's power, the sufferer is identified more closely with his weaknesses.

The Psalms of lament put prayers into the mouth of the afflicted to help them articulate their anguish. They provide a framework for times of crisis and grief, from the misery caused

by darkness and despair to the light of Christ and the joy of his substitutionary atonement. While this movement touches individuals psychologically and the community of the faithful liturgically, there is more: the transition from hurt to joy, crisis to faith, grief to relief, is a profoundly spiritual one. It is God's activity to bring sinners into the midst of his grace.

The Psalms of lament generally follow a recognizable pattern. First, there is a complaint presented directly to God, that God should recognize and relieve the current agony. The agony may be specifically identified or it may be a general cry of distress in the face of great adversity.²² Second, just as these loud complaints are presented directly to God, in almost every case the Psalms of lament conclude with words of praise for God. Praise and lament belong to the same discourse between God and man since one is just as much a part of man's being as the other: "Just as praise is the language of joy, so lamentation is the language of suffering and the language of faith, of the confidence that God continues to be God despite the contrary appearances *sub contrario*."²³ The worthiness of authentic praise is preserved only in contrast to lamentation,

²² In Psalm 6, the author laments in general times by saying, "O Lord rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing..." We are not certain what the lamenter is languishing over, though later he calls for the "workers of evil" (v.8) to depart. In Psalm 38 the anger of the Lord is felt in more specific ways. "Your arrows sunk into me, and your hand comes down on me" (v.2). "My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness" (v.5).

²³ Ngien, *Fruit for the Soul: Luther on the Psalms of Lament*, 2. Ngien also quotes Claus Westermann, "The Role of Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 28 (January 1974): 27: "Just as lamentation is the language of suffering, so the praise of God is the language of joy. One is as much a part of man's being as the other. But it is an illusion to suppose or to postulate that there could be a relationship with God in which there were only praise and never lamentation. Just as joy and sorrow in alternation are a part of the finitude of human experience (Gen. 2-3), so praise and lamentation are a part of man's relationship to God. Hence, something is amiss if praise of God has a place in Christian worship but lamentation does not. Praise can retain its authenticity and naturalness only in polarity with lamentations."

²⁰ Carl Trueman, "Tragic Worship," *First Things*, 234 (2013): 20.

²¹ For more on "negative theology," see Dennis Ngien, *Fruit for the Soul: Luther on the Lament Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 181-185.

for one cannot experience true praise without first coming out of despair's dreadful condition. This is God's work of resurrecting the sinner out of the depths of hell into the realm of heaven.

*Lament brings us into
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Jesus as he now takes
up our laments for us.*

The theology of lament is not a stop gap to explain to confounded Christians why pain and despair continue to infest the narrative of the faithful. It is not a concoction of the clergy to fill the dogmatic breaches in our pastoral theology, or a means to fulfill a need for greater sympathy in pastoral care; "rather a theology of lament is a *sola scriptura* and a *solī Christo* project."²⁴ It orders God's love in the midst of our disorderly lives with shouts that erupt from chaos. As counterintuitive as it may seem, our sufferings plunge us headlong into a deeper and closer relationship with our Lord who knows how severe suffering can be. Gregory Schulz mentions what lament is not:

Lament is not a cry into a void, a type of catharsis under the pressure of suffering – our own or the suffering of loved ones and neighbors. Nor is it ultimately a sort of plastic piety that we can shape to fit our psychologies, theologies or personalities. On the contrary, lament as we learn it in praying of the psalms of lament is the way that God, after forcing us to be the passive recipients of suffering, redeems us and re-creates us emotionally.²⁵

Lament brings us into contact with God in Christ Jesus as he now takes up our laments for us. We are encouraged to join our Savior as our

shared lament breaks the silence that suffering causes. It shows us the pit of despair, puts us in the midst of that pit with our Lord who knows it well, and then calls us into the blessed life of redemption already lived out by Christ himself. The only remedy is through our located-ness with Christ in both our moments of distress and our times of great joy.

Pastoral care utilizes lament in order to give expression of what is right and appropriate in our prayers. Lament psalms are not simply offered by God for Christians to pray, but rather, as God demands that we enter into conversation with him, He also demands that we bring our deepest complaints before his heavenly throne as well. John Kleinig says that, "Complaints are, in fact, an underutilized pastoral and devotional resource. There is much we can learn from them about the art of protesting to God about the misery and injustice that surrounds us."²⁶ Lament gives the sufferer permission and guidance to speak candidly to God about deep-seated problems, and God expects it be so.²⁷ The cry of the sufferer is not one of unique weakness that must be overcome through individual piety and devotion, but rather a reflection of the ever-present sinful condition that plagues all sinners. St. John Chrysostom says:

You cannot keep silent when you are pricked by distress. I certainly do not forbid you to make a sound, but give thanks instead of blasphemy, worship instead of despair. Confess to the Lord and cry out loudly in prayer, cry out loudly glorifying God. In this way your suffering will

²⁶ John W. Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 190. Also underutilized are the hymns of cross and comfort and the Christian life.

²⁷ Luther says, "We must learn to regulate and control the complaint which issues from our heart when we are overwhelmed by God's wrath and death. There is nothing wrong with feeling of God's wrath this way, though we must not fall into the foolish error of disdaining or blaspheming God because of tribulation" AE 13:108.

²⁴ Gregory Schulz, "Pain, Suffering, Lament," *Logia* 24, no. 2 (2015): 11.

²⁵ Schulz, "Pain, Suffering, Lament," 11.

be lightened, because the devil will pull back from your thanksgiving and God's help will be at your side.²⁸

This ancient church-father reminds us to give the devil no reason to be near. He goes on to counsel that, should we turn our face toward the Lord in our sufferings, the devil will tire of his efforts and depart.²⁹

From Suffering to the Theology of the Cross

The link between suffering and the theology of the cross is wrapped in the reality of our Lord's active redemption: God forges the link between our suffering and the coveted cure found in him through the cross of Jesus. Those in the midst of despair find no adequate balm in the theory of relief that tries to mend broken lives from a distance: rather, true healing is experienced in souls stretched out with Christ on the cross, bleeding and dying with him. "There can be no voyeurism here – we view Christ's cross from the experience of our own God-forsaken lives."³⁰ God's hiddenness in suffering becomes a lived-in reality through our death, burial and resurrection with Christ. The cross does not make our sufferings holy, but it teaches us that they are holy only by virtue of Christ's own sufferings.³¹

There is no need to fabricate suffering or imagine struggles. Luther, for instance, simply looks into his own life, and the lives of those to whom he ministers, to discover the lens through

which God's purpose is made clear. He writes:

A theologian of the cross (that is, one who speaks of the crucified and hidden God) teaches that punishments, crosses and death are the most precious treasury of all and the most sacred relics which the Lord of this theology himself has consecrated and blessed, not alone by the touch of this most holy flesh but also by the embrace of his exceedingly holy and divine will, and he has left these relics here to be kissed, sought after, and embraced. Indeed fortunate and blessed is the one who has been deemed by God to be worthy that these treasures of the relics of Christ may be given to such a one; nay rather, who understands that they are given. For to whom are they not offered?³²

For Luther, they are offered to those who are in Christ since they live and die in the sufferings of Christ. For the true sufferer, the theologian of the cross has good news but no solutions for the experience of despair; but it *is* marvelous news that God wraps his children within his gospel promise, and that our sufferings will never be able to destroy God's choice of redemption for the sinner, no matter how long despair persists.

Effective pastoral care to suffering believers leads them into the life of Christ knowing that God remains true to his word. Luther said, "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."³³ Though God's alien work among Christians involves his active involvement in sufferings, he does not revel in our despair. The people of God may languish day by day without knowing why afflictions remain a part of their narrative, so the pastor continues to comfort them with his words of hope and promises of

²⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, 69.

²⁹ Chrysostom also says, "A dog sitting by the table, if it sees the person who is eating continually throw it scraps of food, it stays... If it gets nothing, it goes away. The same with Satan. He gets something... he stays. He gets nothing, he eventually goes away." *On Wealth and Poverty*, 69.

³⁰ Wengert, *Peace, Peace... Cross, Cross*, 200.

³¹ Wengert says: "It is not that the theology of the cross that blesses suffering. Far from it! Instead, it is the sufferer who, driven by suffering, comes to the realization, the *revelatio sub contrario secie* of our true neediness (the revelation of God under the appearance of the opposite)," *Peace, Peace... Cross, Cross*, 205.

³² AE 31:225–6.

³³ Theodore Tappert, ed. *Luther's Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 87.

deliverance. The cross of Christ reveals a God who has suffered despair on our behalf, is with us in times of distress, and knows emphatically what his children are suffering. A God who comes to be with us is the only God who is able to comfort us.

Theology of the Cross

We cannot understand the grace of God without suffering, and we cannot understand suffering apart from the cross. The theology of the cross is predicated upon an event, and formulated on what that event means to those who live in it.³⁴ Without the cross at the center of our theology, we are left with man attempting to attain God's grace and deliverance by his own means. However, the scriptures unveil a salvific narrative put into motion by God himself that leads from the fall to the cross, and then out from the cross to the church where the benefits of the cross are given and received. True theology cannot find its basis in the will, the motivation, and the accomplishments of sinful men who inevitably miss the mark of God's law. Apart from this holy narrative, which places the Savior at a point in time where he is nailed to the cross, redeeming the lost, and bringing his weaknesses to bear into the lives of those he loves, there is no formula for attaining comfort in the midst of misery. Hermann Sasse says:

Always it is from the cross that everything is understood, because hidden in the cross is the deepest essence of God's revelation. Because this is so, Luther's *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) wants to be more than just one of the many theological theories that have appeared in Christian history. It stands against the opposites, the prevailing theology of the Christendom, *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory),

as Luther calls it, and claims to be that right and scriptural theology with which the church of Christ stands and falls. Only of the preaching of this theology, Luther maintains, can it be said that it is the preaching of the Gospel.³⁵

The Gospel depends on the preaching of the cross. A theology of glory only remains in the realm of the law and depends on works of man: this cannot save and does not comfort.

Luther's own spiritual maladies and struggles led him to realize what the cross of Christ meant for those who suffer great despair. By looking at the death of Christ, his writings put into view the deepest nature of the revelation of the cross, which not only draws out his love, but also his wrath. Not only are love and wrath explicitly revealed in the theology of the cross, but so are the entire life and purpose of Jesus. Hermann Sasse says:

What does Theology of the Cross mean? It does not mean that the whole of the church year shrinks to Good Friday. It rather means that one cannot understand Christmas, Easter, or Pentecost without Good Friday. The victor in Easter can only be seen through the shadow of the cross. It is always the cross which illustrates all chapters of theology because the deepest nature of revelation is hidden in the cross.³⁶

The doctrine of the cross is included in the mystery of the incarnation and the glory of the resurrection. "What we call Good Friday and Easter were celebrated together in the ancient churches as the Paschal mystery."³⁷ For the ancient church, the essential element for eternal

³⁴ Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 3.

³⁵ Hermann Sasse, "The Theology of the Cross," in *We Confess Jesus Christ* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 39.

³⁶ Hermann Sasse, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. by Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 387.

³⁷ Sasse, *The Theology of the Cross*, 40.

life is the Incarnation: the Lord must first must come to be one of us with flesh and blood and with every ability to feel the pain and anguish of fallen man, in order that he might die our death and redeem us from all unrighteousness.

Luther's use of the theology of the cross is the way he builds the foundation for understanding the rightly divided word. Like the ancients, Luther does not focus on one doctrine, such as the atonement, set apart from others. He views all the essential components of the life of Christ as the hallmark of orthodox theology. "The cross of Christ is the only instruction in the Word of God there is, the purest theology."³⁸ Luther doubles down by saying that "the cross alone is our theology."³⁹

Cross vs. Glory

The theology of the cross stands in contrast to the theology of glory. Since it is the only true theology, it is imperative that pastors should only be about the theology of the cross for those experiencing great despair. A false theology cannot soothe the distressed condition of the soul since it is founded upon false pretenses — the natural religion of fallen mankind.

While a theology of glory sees God in the events and works of the world, the theology of the cross sees God through the work of Jesus. Plunged into affliction, the theologian of glory will interpret this as God's judgement since the world equates pain and suffering with anger and wrath. Conversely, the theology of the cross sees God only in the suffering of Christ, with what is actually there to be seen of God.⁴⁰ God shows himself as He is, *homo factus est*, taking on flesh and blood and dying in the midst of lowliness. In this way God is seen through the eyes of faith.

³⁸ Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross," in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert, 33–58 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 34.

³⁹ Kolb, *Luther on the Theology of the Cross*, 34.

⁴⁰ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 79.

Glory theology has the people talk about life in terms of its fullness or lack thereof. Life under the cross is not a *talked-about* life but a *lived-in* life that acknowledges that suffering will come but God does not abandon the one in the midst of it. The word of the cross encapsulates our lives as it kills and makes alive. It crucifies the old sinful man in anticipation of the resurrection of the new.⁴¹ It proclaims the most unexpected — that God comes to the weak through weakness and supplies the means for life through death.

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are able to see him.*

Glory theology hopes in what is invisible — a power that resides in the realms of the mysterious and sublime. Cross theology looks upon the crucified one who is not beautiful or splendid but rather humiliated, shame-filled, and weak through pain and death; "but this frightening and depressing aspect shows the *visibilia et posteriora Dei* [visible and hind side of God] that which God lets us see of Himself."⁴² This is where God, who works in the midst of his creation in invisible ways, becomes visible. We do not see God's revelation of grace through creation but rather in the cross, as far as our eyes are able to see him. Therefore the cross is the revelation of God and the only place to look for our salvation. In Thesis 20 of the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther comments:

When according to John 14 Philip, just like a theologian of glory, said; 'Show us the Father!' Christ at once called back those thoughts which wanted to

⁴¹ See also Forde, *On Being a Theology of the Cross*, 2–3.

⁴² Sasse, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, vol. 1, 395.

see God elsewhere and focused them on Himself by saying ‘Philip, he that sees *Me* sees the Father.’ Therefore in Christ Crucified is true theology and knowledge of God.⁴³

The glory of God’s creation is tainted by sin and therefore cannot be the means by which creation attains righteousness. Jesus speaks of knowing God through knowing him — not just who he is but what he did. Jesus cannot be revealed and identified accurately apart from the cross.

The theology of glory assumes that there is a process of attaining what God wants for us, in which we are the key player. Rather than repentance and self-denial, it points to optimistic encouragement, self-esteem and positive thinking. It assumes that sin has not completely limited the ability of the sinner to improve and move closer to the Lord: “the hallmark of a theology of glory is that it will always consider grace as something of a supplement to whatever is left of human will and power.”⁴⁴ This relegates the cross to a means of motivation, a tool that keeps man focused on ascending to the heights of God’s majesty through free will. Grace becomes secondary and sooner or later erodes in a concoction of man-made ideologies that form the basis of an anthropocentric means of attaining salvation.

Rather than a means to cure oneself (*a la* a theology of glory), Gerhard Forde portrays the theology of the cross as a treatment for addicts — a “bottoming out” or an “intervention” so to speak.

In theological terms we must come to confess that we are addicted to sin, addicted to self, whatever form that may take, pious or impious. So theologians of the cross know that we can’t be helped by optimistic appeals to glory,

strength, wisdom, positive thinking and so forth because those things are themselves the problem. The truth must be spoken. To repeat Luther again, the thirst for glory or power or wisdom is never satisfied even by the acquisition of it. We always want more — precisely so that we can declare independence from God.⁴⁵

The cure does not come by means of satisfying the desires of the heart in the hopes that the heart will thirst no more. Rather, the cure comes by means of extinguishing the deadly disease altogether so that nothing is left to afflict the sinner.⁴⁶

In summary, the cross attacks the ways of glory by taking the work of grace away from man and placing it directly on the shoulders of Jesus. Glory theology is founded upon faulty presuppositions about how one comes to know God, namely through the world and the acts of God in the invisible realm. It relies on what is seen in creation and what is not known of God. Cross theology, in contrast, looks on all things through the suffering of Jesus — seeing trials and troubles, along with joys and pleasures, as God’s doing. These are not accidents that need human wisdom and ingenuity in order to conquer. These are lived-in realities that show how we are grafted into the very narrative of a Savior who lived, suffered, died, and rose again as do those who believe in him.

The Cross Beyond Reason

God reveals himself by his hiddenness in suffering; and this is, perhaps, the quintessential identifying mark of the theology of the cross. Luther says, “Man hides what is his own in order to conceal it, but God hides what is his in order to reveal it.”⁴⁷ Luther identifies the paradox of

⁴³ AE 31:53 as found in Sasse, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, vol. 1, 396.

⁴⁴ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 16.

⁴⁵ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 17.

⁴⁶ See Heidelberg Disputation thesis 22: “The remedy for curing desire does not lie in satisfying it, but in extinguishing it,” AE 31:54.

⁴⁷ AE: 51:26.

what seems unreasonable by showing that the invisible God is truly revealed and known in the visible humanity of Christ and his redeeming work on the cross. Even more, he says, we cannot know God, or find him, apart from his sufferings on the cross.⁴⁸ So interlaced is Jesus with his death on the cross, he cannot be rightly understood apart from it.

To know God truly is to know him in weakness instead of strength, in suffering rather than power, in humility rather than majesty.⁴⁹ Hermann Sasse quotes Luther, then expounds the stark intimacy God has with his creation by demonstrating how the Lord's love comes through means the world may think harmful and unimaginable:

“When God brings to life, He does so by killing (*occidendo vivificate*); when He justifies, then He does so by accusing us; when He brings us into heaven, He does so by leading us to hell” (Aland 38, WA 18:633). *Occidendo vivificat* [“By killing he makes alive”] – that is the adequate expression for the unreasonable way God acts. It is beneath the cross of Christ that we learn to believe that. There we see nothing but the suffering, the weakness, the torment of being forsaken by God, the shame, the defeat, the triumph of evil, and the victory of death. For the believer, however, all this is the *visibilia Dei*, that which God lets us see, His strange work behind which He hides His proper work of forgiving, saving, life-giving. Deeply hidden in the events of Good Friday which were seen by human eyes in the great event of the reconciliation between God and mankind, is the victory of the redeemer of the world which can only be believed in the face

of all appearances and against reason, with its doubting question: how is that possible?⁵⁰

Sasse mentions how the theology of the cross is discerned by faith that sees the presence of God through what seems to be misdirected means. This contrasts with the speculative knowledge of reason, which cannot fathom an all-powerful God coming as man in order to die for his creation. Only faith can perceive the true significance of the cross.⁵¹

The theology of the cross is unreasonable and an attack on the sinner's theology of the self. It originates outside of man and introduces a foreign ingredient — a righteousness that cannot be grasped without knowing by faith the humiliating death of Christ. “The cross is the doing of God to us.”⁵² The fallen man desires to cognitively understand the ways of God, while faith draws the believer into the experience of suffering with Christ. Walther von Loewenich writes:

The meaning of the cross does not disclose itself in contemplative thought but only in suffering experience. The theology of the cross does not confront the cross of Christ as a spectator, but is himself drawn into the event. He knows that God can be found only in cross and suffering... For God himself is “hidden in suffering” and wants us to worship him as such... if we are serious about the idea of God and the concept of faith in the theology of the cross, we are faced with the demand of a life under the cross.⁵³

⁵⁰ Sasse, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, vol. 1, 399.

⁵¹ Alister E. McGrath says, “The correlative to *crux sola* is *sola fide*, as it is through faith, through faith alone, that the true significance of the cross is perceived.” *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1985), 174.

⁵² Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 4.

⁵³ Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 113, as found in Ngien, *Fruit for the Soul*, 3, 4.

⁴⁸ AE: 31:51.

⁴⁹ See Dennis Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 5.

God cannot show himself as he is, so he chooses the covering of human nature in order to reveal himself as God who comes to be like us and even to become one of us. This includes the experience of suffering: God places himself in suffering so that in suffering we see God. Luther says, “Through the cross works are dethroned and (the old) Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified.”⁵⁴

The cross of Jesus and the Christian life, with every bit of joy and despair, are inseparable. The Christian bears the cross of trouble and the image of Christ in the midst of daily life within appointed duties to the neighbor, which is the expression of Christian vocation.

Pastoral Care: Applications

Pastors are called to provide soul-care for suffering sheep of the Good Shepherd. Personalized individual care for despairing souls is particularly prudent and necessary. “A pastor may not imagine that he does his ministry justice by public preaching alone. Individual pastoral care and the home visits that become necessary because of it are also an obligation which he may not shirk if he wishes to be regarded as a faithful steward.”⁵⁵ Indeed, *Privatseelsorge*, affords the pastor the opportunity to listen to the painful experiences that form the bleak narratives of those they serve. The *Seelsorger* must first understand the condition of the soul before he is able to make a proper diagnosis concerning the soul’s most essential need.⁵⁶ For this reason, the pastor needs to know two stories well: the story of Christ’s suffering and the story of the one to whom he ministers. Both are essential, so one of his ears listens to the soul in distress while

the other listens to the word of the gospel.

The pastor needs to first assess the condition of the soul in light of these themes. Is this a baptized soul who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord? If so, the physician of souls has a foundation on which to build a proper cure. If not, the proclamation of the gospel, the foundation that Jesus bears all of our sufferings should be patiently shared and explained. Many times a distressed soul bears deep spiritual scars inflicted by sins committed or sins suffered at the hands of others, producing a sense of deep isolation from God’s favor. They may have a baptismal faith but live in the far county, like the prodigal who wasted his father’s inheritance in reckless living and needs to be home. Extraordinary pastoral care meets the soul where it is at but does not leave it there. It brings the salve of God’s abundant comfort through his life-giving word and sacraments as the pastor reconnects the suffering soul to the suffering Savior who is risen again.

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Exploring the sufferer’s narrative often helps build a framework around grief and despair to which God’s narrative can be applied. Telling one’s story is fundamental to self-identity. To tell a story is to have a sense of self — to lose one’s own story is to lose one’s sense of being. Robert Randall suggests that the pastor focus on three aspects: story listening, story stimulating and story enhancing.⁵⁷ The pastor first listens to the one who is suffering, allowing him to tell

⁵⁴ AE 31:53.

⁵⁵ C. F. W. Walther, *American - Lutheran Pastoral Theology*, ed. David W. Loy, trans. Christian C. Tiems (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 319.

⁵⁶ See Wilhelm Loehe, *The Pastor* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 299ff and Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor’s Heart* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019).

⁵⁷ Robert L. Randall, “Reminiscing in the Elderly: Pastoral Care of Self-Narratives,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 40, no. 3 (1986). While Randall uses this method with the elderly, I have found that it has value across all age groups.

his story however he wishes, assessing both words and non-verbal cues, and formulating appropriate questions for the next step. In Randall's second phase of story stimulation, the pastor then encourages him to share more by asking him to expand on various parts of the story, or perhaps asking him how he perceives past events will affect the future.⁵⁸

Once the pastor has helped the individual gain a greater awareness of their story, he seeks to enhance it by weaving it into the story of Christ, connecting the sufferer with Jesus' sufferings and the promise of the gospel. In keeping with a theology of the cross, the pastor does not explain suffering, but rather tells what God provides amid suffering.

When the sufferer's story is joined to the story of Christ, he finds beauty and peace — not in the absence of ugliness and strife, but in the presence of the Savior. Joy and comfort come to the one who discovers that he has a story with which God himself can identify. Disappointments and challenges enable the Christian to stay rooted in the humble acknowledgment of dependence on God's mercy and truth.

The cross of Jesus is not at all glorious in terms of a theology of glory; but it is Christ's story and thus the Christian's story. Gerhard Forde says:

Just as Jesus was crucified so we also are crucified with him. The cross makes us part of its story. The cross becomes our story. That is what it means to say, as Luther did, "The cross alone is our theology."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ For example, one member who recently lost her husband suffered from a deep sense of loneliness. But that wasn't all. After talking about her grief, she revealed she was also very afraid that she would now be an outcast at church. "All of my friends have husbands. They won't accept me now," she said. Her fear was not only loneliness but also rejection from her friends and church community. Keeping visible before her the love of Jesus and the love of those who will not abandon her became a top priority.

⁵⁹ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 7.

Christians are grafted into this story, not once upon a time, but for this time and eternity. Christ promises to be a part of the story with the Christian, its ups and its downs, as it is a tale of the continuing movement of God toward the world, and the Christian toward heaven.⁶⁰

As the pastor listens to the story of suffering, the sin-sick soul reveals its afflictions. Whatever those may be, the pastor interprets them in terms of what they disclose about the sufferer's relationship with God — perhaps where he has sinned, or how his sufferings lead him to wonder if he is God-forsaken. Since God hides himself in the midst of suffering, the theology of the cross is tailor-made for effective care. In other words, he does not merely walk alongside of sufferers, rather he makes himself known to them and enters into their despair, even as he joins them to his life and glory.

The theology of the cross reveals the reality, hidden by sin, that God is who he says he is in his word, in his works, and in his ways. God, through his incarnation and suffering, stands with man while man's suffering is taking place — in no other place than right alongside of him. The mercy of the cross is joined with man's greatest needs of forgiveness, freedom from sin, acceptance and reconciliation. Through the cross, the Lord instills hope for a lost people. He grants help for the lonely. He embodies the true substance of the gospel for the indignant heart that cries out for God's relief. That relief is hidden in the pain and suffering of a Savior who knows the deep agony of carrying out the ultimate Christian vocation. Informed pastoral care not only aims to comfort those who know all too well the emotional and spiritual trials created by sin, the devil and this fallen world, but also demonstrates that they have not lost their purpose and vocation as precious creatures of God.



⁶⁰ Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 141.

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Reflection

AFTERWORD & PRAYER

Faithful *Seelsorgers* know there is deep suffering that afflicts the souls under his care. When these souls suffer, it's natural to our sinful natures to want to turn off the pain, to change the subject, or to explain it away. While our Lord Jesus did heal and restore many sufferers, he never offered easy points on how to stop suffering, nor did he change the subject, or explain it away. Instead, as Dr. Tyler Arnold put it so well, "What is better than having a God that explains suffering is having a God that shares in it."

How we need to hear the Lord's story of suffering and the stories of those who bear burdens and to bring these together in compassionate pastoral care and cure of souls. Psalms and prayers of lament are a divinely-inspired outlet for souls in pain to cry out to the Lord who endured the cross and remains with his suffering ones. We benefit from carefully observing the distinctions between the theologies of the cross and glory and between the hidden and revealed God. Afflicted souls don't need speculation on what God has hidden from us, nor pious platitudes about him; they need the Lord himself with them right in the pits, which is exactly where he is: "a very present help in trouble."

✠ *Father of mercies and God of all comfort, we cry to you for all who suffer in body, soul, and mind and for those you have sent to serve these burdened ones. You cursed this world after our first parents chose death and then poured out the full curse on your Beloved Son to save us. You know our pain and hear our every cry to you. Give us your Holy Spirit, that we may cast all our cares on you, be attentive to cries of the anguished, and trust your Son's presence and care in every affliction; through the same, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.*

Rev. David Fleming

