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The Lord's Prayer in Luther's Catechism

JAMES ARNE NESTINGEN

AS COMMONLY AS IT APPEARS IN PERSONAL DEVOTION AND THE LITURGICAL life of the church, the Lord's Prayer draws surprisingly little theological attention. Children raised in the Christian faith often learn it as the first full paragraph of their speech; if new Christians don't get a full treatment in adult instruction, they quickly come to know the prayer as generations have, by saying it with the congregation in services or with those standing with them at the close of a meeting. Yet for all the prominence of the prayer, full theological treatments are not nearly as common as might be expected.

I. RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

This has not always been the case. The World War II generation of German theologians, perhaps just because of their experience, produced some classic studies, most all of them published in English translations. Joachim Jeremias and Ernst Lohmeyer did full dress New Testament studies, Jeremias setting it in the context of first-century prayer, Lohmeyer paying particularly close attention to the eschatology.¹ Helmut Thielicke published a classic set of sermons on the Lord's Prayer

¹Joachim Jeremias, "The Lord's Prayer in Light of Recent Research," in *The Prayers of Jesus*, trans. John Reumann (London: SCM, 1967) 82-107; Ernest Lohmeyer, "Our Father"; *An Introduction to the Lord's Prayer*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

Luther's explanations of the Lord's Prayer are not concerned primarily with correct doctrine. The prayer, for Luther, is a cry wrung from the crucible of daily life, an exposition of the shape of life lived under the sign of the cross in the hope of the resurrection.

that were preached when the city of Hamburg was being bombed.² Gerhard Ebeling, now often derided for his existentialism, shows some of the strength of Rudolf Bultmann's type of interpretation.³

With this scholarship, there have also been some masterful treatments of Martin Luther's interpretation of the Lord's Prayer. Herbert Girgensohn's two-volume *Teaching Luther's Catechism*, an invaluable work, contains a definitive treatment.⁴ Girgensohn was also closely interested in the eschatology of the prayer. Though it has unfortunately not been translated, Albrecht Peters—a trenchant critic of Ebeling's existential treatment of Luther—did a five-volume treatment of the catechism that sets the current standard.⁵

For the generations that followed, however, it is as though the Lord's Prayer is merely piety or a liturgical construct of the early church that obtained a traditional textual standing. With rare exception, consideration of the prayer gets left for popular piety, with edifying treatments aimed for the religious bookstores stocked by publications of the Christian Booksellers Association.

The best antidote to such neglect of the Lord's Prayer is some close study of Luther's interpretation. He returned to it regularly, preaching and writing on the prayer, treating it as one of the keystones of the faith. At a preliminary level, Luther heard the Lord's Prayer as simple instruction in how to pray, writing of it this way in a letter to his barber, Peter. But as usual in Luther's catechisms, there is another level. As Luther heard it there, teaching the faithful to pray, the Lord Jesus is at the same time telling believers what to look for and expect in the crucible of everyday life, where the heart is contended for by the powers at work in this age—the devil, the world, and the sinful self—as well as the Spirit of the new age, released in Christ's death and resurrection. Thus for Luther, the Lord's Prayer is a continuing lesson in the theology of the cross.

In order to see how this works, it is necessary to begin, first of all, with some examination of Luther's own situation in writing the catechism as well as his understanding of the situation of the believer. With that, secondly, it is possible to see more clearly the theology that shapes his exposition.

II. LUTHER'S SITUATION

In the later 1520s, the Wittenberg reform—just gaining the pejorative nickname “Lutheran”—underwent a decisive change in perspective. To that point, a combination of external political forces had joined with Luther's own apocalyptically driven disinterest in structures to prevent the reform from developing organizational form. Though it had widespread sympathy and support, among the

²Helmut Thielicke, *Our Heavenly Father: Sermons on the Lord's Prayer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960).

³Gerhard Ebeling, *On Prayer: Nine Sermons*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966). The volume was reissued in 1978.

⁴Herbert Girgensohn, *Teaching Luther's Catechism*, trans. John W. Doberstein, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 1:199-306.

⁵Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen*, 5 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990-94).

influential as well as popularly, the reform remained an *ad hoc* amalgam in which Luther functioned like a catalyst. At the first Diet of Speyer in 1526, however, supporting politicians gained what they interpreted as the power to effect reform in their own territories. Urged on by the elector of Saxony, but also by their own concern for public witness, Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues began to think about bringing their movement home in the life of the congregations and the families—in a rudimentary way, organizationally; above all, in witness.

Forms of catechesis date back to the early church and beyond. One argument has it that 1 Peter, one of Luther's favorite books, was originally written as a catechism for new believers. Augustine himself wrote an *Enchiridion*, or handbook to the faith. The medieval church had produced a rich tradition. And in fact, the Wittenbergers had already been at work at this level. Several of Luther's friends had put their hand to it, including both Johann Agricola and Philip Melancthon.⁶ But the authority claimed after Speyer I and the results of the Saxon church visitation, which had been implemented to survey the circumstances of the local parishes, gave the project a new urgency. In 1528, Luther himself put his hand to it, writing the Small Catechism for families to use in the instruction of their children and the German or Large Catechism for the use of pastors and teachers.

The public character of the catechism can be observed above all in the basic outline Luther employed. Neither the Small Catechism nor the Large gives even a hint of indoctrinating a Lutheran gnosis; instead, they are organized on the basis of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. For Luther himself, the three together formed "the catechism" in contradistinction to his own works, which have been "the catechism" for generations of Lutherans since. "The catechism" embodies the Catholic consensus of the faith as historically maintained by the church. In his own catechisms, Luther included the dominical sacraments, Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and shortly thereafter added a statement on absolution, because all of these are perennially controverted in the life of the church.

Shaped by the ecumenical tradition of the church, the catechisms are novel for the order of the five, later six, chief parts. While other catechisms contained some of the same elements, Luther set a different precedent with his sequence, which he explained as following the order of experience:

There are three things that everyone must know to be saved. First, he must know what we are to do and leave undone. Then, as he discovers that it is impossible for him to accomplish either with his own strength, he must know where to seek and find the power that will enable him to do his duty. And, in the third place, he must know where to seek and obtain that aid.⁷

⁶Tomothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melancthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over Poenitentia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) 47-76.

⁷From Luther's "Eine kurze Form der zehn Gebote; eine kurze Form des Glaubens; eine kurze Form des Vaterunsers" (1520), *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883-1980) 7:204-205; English by J. Michael Reu, in *Luther's Small Catechism: A New English Translation Prepared by an Intersynodical Committee: A Jubilee Offering, 1529-1929* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1929) 15.

The Ten Commandments set out the requirements of creaturely life, incumbent by creation; the Creed declares the gifts of the Triune God; the Lord's Prayer gives voice to the circumstances of the believer living in the world of the *nomos* (law) in the hope of the gospel.

While it explains the sequence, Luther's statement also indicates his method. Interpreting what he had received as defining statements of life in faith, he treats them experientially, in light of their impact in the situation of the believer. Karl Barth is reputed to have said that the theologian should keep the Scripture in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. Always pastorally inclined, Luther seeks a similar, if more proportional combination, honoring both the historic texts and the way they register in everyday life.

Approaching the catechism in this way, Luther does not treat the Decalog either exegetically or as a particularly Christian ethic. Rather, he approaches the commandments analytically, as a summary of the essential demands made in conditions of life where life is not a power possessed but a gift received in relationships with the Creator, other creatures, and, implicitly, the creation.⁸ Into the web of such overlapping relationships, amidst all of the demands imposed by the shape of creaturely interdependence, the gospel comes as an alien word, declaring God's triune self-giving—in creation itself, in Christ, and in the work of the Holy Spirit.

In daily life, the law, codified in the Ten Commandments, and the gospel, declared by the Creed, place believers in a fundamental tension. Because the demands of the law arise out of the conditions of creaturely life, they are an inherent part of human experience—one way or another, they bear themselves out, if not in a codified form like the Decalog, in everyday limits and consequences. Further, compounding itself, the law becomes a power that attacks the person's sense of self, making league with sin, death, and the devil as powers of temptation. The gospel enters from outside of such pervasive experience, attacking the illusion that life can be obtained by the self through either obedience or withdrawal. It declares that the life sought in and by the law is bestowed as gift of grace by the Triune God. In this way, law and gospel contend against one another, the law claiming to bestow what only the gospel can give, the gospel undermining the law by declaring God's gracious self-giving. As Ernst Käsemann once remarked, life becomes a battleground, open to all comers.

Battered by the law's relentless demands, under the assault of the powers of this age, yet gripped by the gospel's overflowing promise, faith lives under the sign of the *simul*—*simul iustus et peccator* (simultaneously saint and sinner). Faith speaks two words that appear to be mutually exclusive but which are both required in relation to God. On the one hand, it says, "I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him"—the *peccator*. This confession originates in a suspicion raised by the intractability of the law's

⁸Still the best treatment of Luther's interpretation of the commandments is by Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Eric W. and Ruth Gritsch, ed. Victor I. Gruhn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

conditions as the law continuously undermines the very certainty that it demands by requiring a selfless obedience of the self. The suspicion raised by the law is confirmed by the gospel, which declares, at the same time, the promise that elicits the rest of the phrase in Luther's explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism, "But the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith"⁹—the *iustus*. What the law can only require, the gospel actually bestows, in repentance and faith.

There is both a death and a resurrection in this third-article confession. Acknowledging that faith and thus life itself is beyond the power of the self is the death of self. The illusion that shapes the life of the old Adam and Eve, that a death-defying wisdom or knowledge can be obtained from the law, dies here. Just so, to paraphrase one of Luther's best known statements, Adam and Eve are here restored to the point from which they fell. Easter blossoms, full of the power of the resurrection, in that God's creatures are gripped by the grace bestowed by "the Lord and giver of life."

Luther's explanations of the Lord's Prayer arise from such an analysis of the situation of faith. Barraged by the relentless demands of the law, under assault by the powers of this age yet gripped in the hope of the gospel, the believer learns "where to seek and obtain that aid." So, while expositing the Lord's Prayer at its first level, as instruction in how to pray, Luther is at the same time describing the contention in which faith lives, giving language for the rhythm of death and resurrection that is the hallmark of life in Christ. At this level, the Lord's Prayer is a cry wrung from the crucible, an exposition of the shape of life lived under the sign of the cross in the hope of the resurrection.

III. AN ORGANIZATIONAL QUESTION

In the Small Catechism's explanations, Luther treats both the third and the seventh petitions as summaries. The explanation of the third, "your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," refers back to both the hallowing of God's name and the coming of God's kingdom. The seventh, "deliver us from evil," is explicitly named a summary. This treatment, along with Luther's use of the traditional breaking of the Ten Commandments into two tables, suggests that the prayer might also be taken in two parts. Many have observed parallels between the first table of the commandments and the early petitions of the Lord's Prayer, as well, giving more credence to the idea.

If Luther did think about dividing the prayer into parts, however, he didn't develop the idea any further. While there are some intriguing possibilities, none of them quite work. One possibility would be to take the first three petitions as the crucifixion side, the remaining four as the resurrection. Calling out to God, pray-

⁹Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 345. Hereafter, *BC*.

ing for God's name, kingdom and will, we are effectively praying against the old sinner in each of us, who would rather die than ask and whose defining efforts take place on behalf of our own good names, to build our own kingdoms, and to enforce our own wills. That is a death. By the same token, the new self raised in Christ is raised on the good graces of daily bread and forgiveness; it recognizes the power of temptation and calls out for deliverance. But such a division is a little too neat, attractive as it might be: each of the petitions has both a death and resurrection built right into it. So, for example, if asking is dying, God has nevertheless promised to hear; forgiveness frees, but by putting the resentful, revenge-seeking self to death.

Another way of organizing the Lord's Prayer into two parts would be to take the possible parallel to the commandments. Then in the first part, we would be praying for ourselves in relation to God, asking for the word and faith and help in temptation; in the second, we would be praying for ourselves in relation to our neighbors, asking for the bread and forgiveness necessary to living in relationship, help with the self-enclosing temptations like despair, and, finally, deliverance from evil. But again, the idea fails. The Lord's Prayer sees all of life *coram deo*, in relation to God; the neighbor is intimately involved in the hearing of God's word, the coming of the kingdom, and the doing of God's will.

So, for whatever help a teacher or preacher might get from dividing the Lord's Prayer into parts, the best alternative appears to be the one that Luther took, working it through, petition by petition. Though they stand together in a single paragraph, they are rich enough individually for a lifetime's meditation. Luther's interpretations share the same character, particularly for the way in which they point to the *sub contrario* (under the sign of the opposite) nature of life in faith.

IV. THE PETITIONS

In a classic study of Luther's theology of the cross, one of the definitive volumes of Luther research, Walter von Loewenich identifies five characteristics of such a way of thinking. It begins with the conviction that God is known not through speculation but revelation; regards this revelation as indirect or veiled; insists that such knowledge is gained not through active works but through passive suffering and is therefore a matter of faith; and, finally, is joined with a practical emphasis on suffering.¹⁰ These themes are pervasive in Luther's work and can be taken as informing assumptions in explanations of the individual petitions.

It is important to note, however, as Gerhard Forde argues,¹¹ that the real subject of such a way of thinking is not so much theology as the theologian. Reducing life under the cross to a set of theological propositions has a way of becoming a the-

¹⁰Walter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976) 19ff.

¹¹Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputations, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 9.

ology of glory—a wisdom of suffering employed by the old Adam or Eve to transcend the reality of death in another futile attempt at self-deliverance. Then the theology of the cross is just one more ideology, hawking itself in the marketplace as a breakfast of champions. In theology, as any other enterprise, “whoever seeks his life will lose it; whoever loses her life for my sake will find it” (see Matt 10:39). One becomes a theologian of the cross not by enumerating theological themes but by dying with Christ in the crucible of everyday life and being raised with him under the sign of the cross.

Maybe this is why the theology of the cross comes to such poignant expression in the Lord’s Prayer. Prayer takes place in a different posture—the self is not the active agent, but a suppliant. Even in theologies that place a premium on personal participation, whether in knowledge or decision, prayer breaks through the religious pretense, undermining claims to autonomy and self-sufficiency. At bottom, to pray is to ask.

The introduction

Under such assumptions, the critical issue in the introduction to the Lord’s Prayer—“Our Father in heaven”—is the relationship necessary to asking. In the Large Catechism, Luther addresses this matter head on by spelling out the basis of prayer, beginning with the Second Commandment—“You shall not take God’s name in vain”—as the command to pray,¹² then moving on to biblical promises in which God commits to hearing our prayers. Finally, he calls attention to the gift of having the words of the Lord’s Prayer from Jesus’ own mouth. In the Small Catechism, he takes up the same issue by spelling out the familial images Jesus invokes with the term “Father.”¹³

Either way, whether in the more developed discussion in the Large Catechism or the compact summary of the Small, the problem is that, living in the crucible of every day, we have to be encouraged to pray. The Holy Spirit has called, gathered, enlightened, sanctified, and kept, as the third article explains, but “the devil, along with the world and our flesh, resists our efforts with all of his power. Consequently nothing is so necessary as to call upon God incessantly and drum into his ears our prayer that he may give, preserve and increase in us faith and obedience to the Ten Commandments and remove all that stands in our way and hinders us from fulfilling them.”¹⁴ In the course of the discussion, spelling out the command and promise, Luther goes on to enumerate problems that beset prayer, such as convictions of unworthiness and the like.

Clearly, as the common objection has it, taken in isolation the language of the Small Catechism’s explanation is patriarchal. But the assumption guiding it is hardly the Norman Rockwell-esque world of father-knows-best. Like a magnet’s head, faith draws its opposite—a voracious unbelief that smells the aroma of death particularly in asking, that has a whole list of compelling reasons for being discour-

¹²BC, 420; Luther’s exposition of the prayer in the Large Catechism is found in BC, 420-436.

¹³BC, 346; Luther’s exposition of the prayer in the Small Catechism is found in BC, 346-348.

¹⁴BC, 420.

aged about prayer and so reduces it to routine, refuses prayer altogether, or turns it into pious self-demonstration. Prayer is only possible on the basis of God's self-disclosure in command and promise, finally in Christ Jesus.

The first petition

Luther interprets the first petition, "Holy be your name," in light of the biblical link between the name and the word. God's name, as indicated by the story of Moses' attempts to squeeze it out of him, discloses God's nature (Exod 3:13-15). By the same token, Jesus says, "Out of the treasure of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt 12:34). On the basis of this connection, asking for the hallowing of God's name is a prayer for the faithful hearing of God's word, in its preached and sacramental form. At the same time, it is a prayer that God's word will do what it does, shaping faith and life within us. In this way, the petition recalls both the Second and Third Commandments, requesting that they be fulfilled in us.

One of the critical differences between Luther and some of his subsequent sixteenth- and seventeenth-century interpreters shows up here. Following Philip Melancthon's later lead, the authors of the Formula of Concord defined the true speaking of God's word doctrinally. Interpreted in this way, the petition becomes a request for *reine lehre*, pure doctrine. While Luther was also concerned about proper theological definition, the measure of the truth of the word occurs as it bears out its proper effect in the faith and life of the believer. God's word is holy when, wielded by the Holy Spirit, it does what it is supposed to do, taking hold of the heart.

Opposition is assumed. God's word is not a possession that can be taken for granted in either public or personal life. Though word and sacrament have been entrusted to the church, the Holy Spirit "works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel," as Article V of the Augsburg Confession states.¹⁵ And because the means of grace takes the form of a human word, it has to contend with all of the other human words that lay their claims, inveigh, demand, and threaten. Because God's revelation is indirect or veiled, it is always vulnerable.

The second petition

The explanation of the second petition, "Your kingdom come," follows out of the first. Praying for the word and its proper effect in the believer already implies a request for the faith that goes with it. In the Large Catechism, Luther speaks of the coming of God's kingdom in two ways: "first, it comes here, in time, through the Word and faith, and secondly, in eternity, it comes through the final revelation," in Christ's return.¹⁶

Lohmeyer and Girgensohn, emphasizing the original eschatological context of the Lord's Prayer, give particular attention to this petition.¹⁷ It is closely related to Jesus' preaching of the coming kingdom, with an apocalyptic urgency that

¹⁵BC, 31.

¹⁶BC, 427.

¹⁷Lohmeyer, "Our Father," 88-110; Girgensohn, *Teaching Luther's Catechism*, 242-256.

breaks out in the power of the gospel as well as in warnings of impending conflagration. In fact, the whole prayer has a forward lean, anticipating the end, each of the petitions being shaped by the expectation.

Luther was well aware of this urgency. Luther recovered not only the New Testament's theology of the cross but also its apocalyptic orientation, a critical factor in understanding his way of thinking. But his eschatology is more like Isaiah's or Paul's than it is like that of the book of Revelation. So the second manifestation of the kingdom, at the end, forms a horizon for the first, in which the Spirit of the risen Christ exercises dominion in the faith that relies on God for every good. The expectation of God's ultimate rule and faith in everyday life go hand in hand.

Hidden under the contrary factors of this age, however, God's dominion competes against all the other influences that seek the heart's allegiance. As Luther argued against Erasmus in *The Bondage of the Will*, the self is a beast meant to be ridden, with opposing riders in contention.¹⁸ A seemingly endless array of loyalties and loves compete for the affections, drawing a person this way and that in a zigzag of confused longings. In and through them, the powers of this age are at work. Calling out, "your kingdom come," is a prayer for God's sure hand on the rein.

The third petition

In the third petition, "Your will be done on earth as in heaven," the opposition that has attacked prayer, dishonored God's name, and undermined faith is identified explicitly—the devil, the world, and our sinful self, an array of powers linked by the conviction that death is in control and that, therefore, faith is illusory. To pray, "your will be done," is to pray against such powers in the hope of the resurrection, expecting that Christ Jesus has the last word.

With the opposition flushed out in the open, the Large Catechism speaks directly about the conflicts that characterize life in faith:

[W]here God's Word is preached, accepted or believed, and bears fruit, there the blessed holy cross will not be far away. Let nobody think he will have peace; he must sacrifice all that he has on earth—possessions, honor, house and home, wife and children, body and life. Now, this grieves our flesh and the old Adam, for it means that we must remain steadfast, suffer patiently whatever befalls us, and let go whatever is taken from us.¹⁹

If such a statement is thought of as a command or appeal, the offense multiplies. The words fly right in the face of the bootstrap mentality of popular culture. This is not a prescription but a description: believers the world over face such circumstances daily, learning what it is to lose relationships and sinecures that have been defining. This is the context of the petition.

In the Small Catechism's explanation, Luther names the way God deals with the opposition: by hindering and defeating "every evil counsel" of the powers ar-

¹⁸Martin Luther on *the Bondage of the Will*. A New Translation of *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525), trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1957) 103.

¹⁹BC, 429.

rayed against us. In these terms, the prayer turns. To this point, we have been praying for the things of God, as Luther points out in the Large Catechism discussion—God's name, kingdom, and will. When we say "your will be done," however, the implicit over-againstness of the earlier petitions becomes explicit. "God's name is holy in itself"; "God's kingdom comes without our prayer," with no help from the pious. But now, when we ask that the "sinful self" along with the other powers be hindered and defeated, we are explicitly praying against ourselves. There is a breach, a decisive discontinuity between God and the sinner that requires a break—the sinner must die.

Generally, in North American popular culture, repentance is thought of as an act of will, as a demand to be fulfilled by the self under the ministrations of the law. It is something sinners should do when apprehended. Luther speaks of repentance in a very different way. It is what happens to sinners as we get caught up in the maelstrom of daily demands and, not knowing where to turn, hear the word of Christ's promise. Then there is a genuinely healthy self-rejection—a death. The self says, "I can't take this anymore. There is nothing left. I can't go on this way." As the promise takes hold once more, the litany of dread evoked by the hinderings and defeats of everyday starts to take on overtones of hope and joy. There is death and resurrection, the peculiar hope of the gospel that thrives under the sign of the opposite, expecting good things of God in jail cells, by beds in intensive care units, at the graveside.

Two characteristic themes of the theology of the cross come to focus here. When von Loewenich speaks of a knowledge gained passively and the emphasis on suffering, he describes both the breach and its aftermath. The stories of faith that are told among believers have a dark background. They begin with self loss—in a familial crisis, a lost job, a divorce, a move, the death of a parent—and continue with a description of confidence and hope given in just such loss. The faith that turns to Christ Jesus in hope gets generated in suffering, by the power of the Spirit working through the word. As such, it knows itself to be broken, yet hopefully. When the illusions of a self-made autonomy end, suffering loses its terror. It is still suffering, surely, but now with the Good Friday there is also Easter.

The fourth petition

In the petition on daily bread, the fourth, Luther invokes a biblical promise particularly dear to people who have known hunger. He sums up Pss 34:10 and 37:19 by asserting, in the words of the Small Catechism, "God provides daily bread, even to the wicked."²⁰ In the Large Catechism, acknowledging the reality of disparate diets, Luther attributes the difference to problems of distribution—God provides for everyone, but the rich hoard at the expense of the poor.²¹

With this, the focus of the petition shifts to faith's gratitude. Living in the crucible, where the injustice of unequal distribution and the continuing power of want are

²⁰BC, 347.

²¹BC, 430.

manifest, the temptation is either outrage or, on the other side of the coin, a debilitating cynicism. Struggling against such self-indulgence, we pray in the fourth petition that we might realize that God does give daily bread in all of its forms to sinners and does so freely, graciously, without regard to merit or the lack of it. There is a death involved here, to be sure—the self-made, self-realizing, heaven-storming overachiever and the superior, withdrawing self-protector both meet their Waterloo. Just so, there is freedom and hope—there are gifts, and they are given in such abundance that the reality of injustice and inequality can be acknowledged in a confident expectation of good.

The fifth petition

For the pious, whether they be religious types bent on moral self-improvement or secular saints seeking above all to be well-adjusted, the fifth petition comes with a jolt: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” The petition takes for granted the reality of broken relationships, in the family, the congregation, or the larger community, and insists, in Luther’s explanation, that such faults disqualify the possibility of remedy on a personally achievable basis. The petition is a request for a grace that will both restore the implicated self and overflow into other sustaining relationships.

Luther’s analysis has been faulted by contemporary theologians arguing that people no longer feel guilt to the degree the reformer assumed and that, therefore, the word of forgiveness has lost its relevance. The multiplication of self-help publications, counseling agencies, and pharmaceutical therapies—along with the deluge in the media—might indicate a need to reconsider this modern objection. The measure of the gospel is not suburban sensitivities or the lack of them. In fact, an incapacity for guilt in a world so out of balance may be the real pathology.

From a theological point of view, it has to be assumed that giving forgiveness such a strategic place in this prayer Jesus considered it a fundamental necessity, on the order of daily bread, for the pious and impious alike. At least, Luther begins with such an assumption, understanding forgiveness less as a therapeutic remedy for guilt and more as freedom to enter into relationship with Creator and creature on positive, gracious grounds. In his vocabulary, forgiveness, justification, and freedom are all synonyms. Only on such a basis can a person live in the crucible, with all of the contradictions, disappointments, and illusory quests.

The sixth petition

In the Small Catechism’s explanations, Luther strikes a parallel between the third petition and the sixth, “lead us not into temptation.” Both are prayers against the powers of this age that would “hinder us from hallowing his name and prevent the coming of his kingdom”²² and “deceive or mislead us into unbelief, despair, and other great and shameful sins.”²³

²²BC, 347 (third petition).

²³BC, 347-348 (sixth petition).

Interpreted eschatologically, the original connotation of the “temptation,” the “time of trial,” or the “test,” was the conflagration that Jesus speaks of in the little apocalypse of Mark 13. Convinced throughout the reformation that this time was approaching, Luther, in the later 1530s, attempted some calculations of the day and hour. But in the catechisms, he takes the cosmological imagery in its more immediate, personal connection.

In the crucible of everyday life, where “the law, sin, and death” or “the devil, the world, and our sinful self” decoy like so many hunters, despair and misplaced faith are ever present threats, materializing out of what appear to be the only real possibilities of safety. Exposed, confronted, the self turns inward, seeking within itself the resources and plans necessary to cope. In the inevitable disappointments that follow, it conceives new plans and finds other resources, disappointment feeding on itself until all hope appears to be lost and despair sets its grip. Or the self turns outward, seeking by heroic effort to conquer the forces of the night, embroiling itself with “creatures, saints, and devils” to achieve what only the Creator can bestow. Despair and heroism are two sides of the same coin, the self-seeking self.

Freedom from despair and from the idolatrous cycle of misplaced trust happens only under the sign of Good Friday and Easter, in the death of the self-questing sinner and the resurrection of a new self in Christ's hands. This happens in the praying of the petition. In these words, the Lord Jesus takes on the powers of temptation to overcome them in faith.

The emphasis on faith that von Loewenich finds characteristic of the theology of the cross shows up particularly in this sixth petition, as also in the second. But it can't be isolated to just the two—the *sola fide* (faith alone) is like the clapper in a bell, sounding through each of the explanations and through all of Luther's work. Faith is the contemporary equivalent of the resurrection of the dead.

The seventh petition

The last petition, “Deliver us from evil,” summarizes the whole prayer. As Luther interprets it, we have prayed for indispensable necessities of creaturely life: for the word, the faith to go with it, and for help against the powers of this age; for a gracious awareness of the sustaining gifts, freedom in relationship to God and our neighbors, and a sure grip on the shoulder in the face of temptation. With this, gathering up all of our hopes, we ask for deliverance from all of the evils that beset life.

In the original, apocalyptic context of the Lord's Prayer, evil includes all the powers that have made life in this age into a crucible. Using the method that he has followed throughout the prayer, Luther takes this prayer for the age to come, in which evil has been domesticated, in personal terms. He notes two evils, those that take hold of us now and those of “our last hour.” In both circumstances, the Triune God is the one to whom faith turns, expecting that in Christ the last word has already been spoken. It is the word of resurrection.

Amen

For this reason, Luther adds one more explanation, this one of the “amen.” “‘Amen, amen’ means ‘Yes, yes, it shall be so.’”²⁴ In the crucible, with the law’s relentless demands and accusations; with powers loose compounding themselves in death; given over to forces beyond ourselves that nevertheless work themselves out within us, there can be no security. But there is the certainty bestowed by the one to whom the Lord’s Prayer is addressed. So, sometimes tentatively, sometimes emphatically, faith says, “That’s right; this is the way it’s going to be.” “If we are faithless, [God] is faithful—for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim 2:13). ⊕

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²⁴BC, 348.