

reading the Bible with Luther



Session 2: Reading the Bible Theologically

by Virgil Thompson

Reading the Bible Theologically

Martin Luther learned to read the Bible from reading the Bible. The promise of the Bible for faith lies in diving deeply into the depths of its story. In this way we learn what is important—what gives life and the freedom to live it. But if the promise is to be realized, says Leander Keck, “*nothing can replace reading the text again and again, questioning and being questioned, objecting and being objected to, discovering and being discovered.*”¹ That remains the promise of reading the Bible with Luther.

For faith there is no book more promising, and more compelling, than the Bible. We are justified to believe, on the basis of our Lord’s promise, that through the means of Bible study, where and when it pleases God, “*The Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.*”² What could be more promising than that? What could be more compelling?

Luther never tired of emphasizing that faith depends solely on the Holy Spirit for enlightenment. This accounts for the power of the Bible. It explains why the Bible “*will not be altered by the one who studies it; instead, it transforms the one who loves it. It draws the individual in—into itself—and into its own powers.*”³ Two Psalms especially taught Luther how to read the Bible in trust that God uses this means to call, gather, enlighten and keep us in the promise of Christian faith and life.

Psalm 119 Teaches How to Read the Bible for Faith

At its heart (vv. 65-72), Psalm 119 teaches that the life of faith in God involves prayerful study of the Bible in the light of the afflictions we suffer.⁴ Let’s take a closer look at these verses of the Psalm.

In the opening verse of the section (v. 65), we confess that the Lord has treated us well—just as He has promised He would. In the next verse we pray that the Lord will teach us the way of faith according to God’s Word, for as verse 72 states, the Word of God “*is worth more than all the money in the world*” (TEV). And in verses 67 and 71 the Psalmist acknowledges that it is through suffering that faith has learned to trust itself to the promise of God, alone.

The idea that suffering makes the believer a more attentive, wiser and more eager student of God’s Word as set forth in the Bible may seem strange at first. But as strange as it may seem, the Psalm is confident that the Lord God uses suffering as the means to drive us to His promise to be God for us.

The process of reading the Bible for faith—thinking about it, discussing it—is what theology is all about. The word theology is comprised of two Greek words: *theos*, which is the Greek word for God, and *logos*, a huge Greek word which involves thinking, discussing and reading, ideas, language, and literature, all rolled into one. Thus, theology is the discipline of thinking about and discussing God in relation to life and life in the light of God’s promises. For Luther, theology is synonymous with reading and discussing the Bible.

As we have seen, Psalm 119 prescribes—according to Luther—a three-way approach to theology. The first rule in reading the Bible for faith is to pray for God’s Spirit to enlighten us and to fulfill all God’s promises to us. The second rule directs us to think about and discuss—without ever tiring of it—the affairs and cares of our lives in light of what we read. And the third rule promises that the agonizing struggle⁵ of life is the means by which God moves us to trust Him as the only God for us. The experiences of life that shake

us to the bone open us to hear and trust the sweet word of God’s unconditional promise to be for us and not against us.

Psalm 51 Teaches the Subject Matter of Theology

While Psalm 119 teaches how to read the Bible theologically—that is to say, for faith—Psalm 51 teaches the true subject matter of theology. According to the Psalm, Christians confess their sin: “*My sin is ever before me ... Against you, you alone, have I sinned.*” The sin which the Psalm has in mind is the original sin: “*Indeed, I was born guilty*” (vv. 1-5). It is the sin of blindness and ingratitude that refuses to acknowledge God’s freely-giving nature and goodness.

Everything we have and are comes freely from God’s fatherly goodness and divine mercy. When we lose faith in that promise, we immediately descend to the covetous and callous life of Scrooge. We are jealous to get and protect our fair share—and more. The words of the Psalm put into the mouth of the believer the prayer that God would “*purge and wash me ... Create in me a clean heart ... Put a right spirit within me*” v.v. 6-12). And then, the joy of salvation restored, forgiven sinners are made free to sing the praises of God and to speak God’s judgment of sin and forgiveness to others (v.v. 13-17). In other words, the subject matter of theology is:

- Humans, guilty of sin, and
- God, the Savior of sinners.

Looking Ahead to the Next Issue

Genesis 1 and 2 launches the story of humanity in relation to God. It begins with God’s gracious gift of life. As Luther had summed up in the Small Catechism, the Genesis story sets forth the Christian belief that God has created everything that exists throughout the whole blooming, blinking, throbbing, teeming cosmos—day and night, earth and stars, sun and moon, birds of the air, creatures of the sea and animals of every variety—not least of which are human beings. Not only does God give life—He continually provides everything necessary to sustain the life of creation. All this God does freely out of His fatherly goodness and mercy.

In the next issue, we will look more closely with Luther at Genesis 1 – 2, the Biblical story of God’s promised gift of life and the human response to the promise.

To download a free copy of this article and the Bible study guide on the next page, go to:

<http://www.solapublishing.org/pages/Adult-Education.html>

Select: **Reading the Bible with Luther - Session 2**

Notes

- ¹ “The Premodern Bible in the Postmodern World.” *Interpretation* 50.2 (1996): 135.
- ² *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*. Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 355.
- ³ *Luther’s Works*. American Edition, 55 vols. Eds., Pelikan and Lehmann (St Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 10:332 (on Ps. 68:14 [*First Lectures on the Psalms*, 1513]). Quoted in Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2008), 71.
- ⁴ Luther’s view of theology is set forth in the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his German writings. See *Luther’s Works*. Ed. by J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann. (Philadelphia: Fortress (1960), 34:283–88. There is also a splendid explanation of Luther’s understanding of theology in *Theology the Lutheran Way*, by Oswald Bayer. Translated and edited by Jeffrey Silcock and Mark Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2007). See pp. 33–66.
- ⁵ “Agonizing struggle” is the term used by Oswald Bayer to translate Luther’s third rule of theology—*tentatio*. See Oswald Bayer. *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2003), 21.
- ⁶ *Faciens ex infoelicibus et superbis diis homines veros, idest [!] miseros et peccatores. Operationes in Psalmos*, WA 5:128.38–39. Notice: According to Luther the true and genuine human being is—a sinner! It is impossible to even enumerate merely the consequences arising from this. To be sure, this does not mean that human beings were villains or nasty. “Sinner” is not an ontological category, but instead marks our situation before God.

See page 8 for the Bible study portion of this article.

Virgil Thompson

teaches *New Testament* at Gonzaga University. A prolific author and former pastor, he currently serves as managing editor of *The Lutheran Quarterly*.



reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study



by Virgil Thompson

Session 2: Reading the Bible Theologically

Study and Prayer in Light of our Afflictions

Each installment of our series will offer suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. Psalm 119, according to Luther, has a three-fold emphasis. These themes of the Psalm establish the way to read the Bible for faith: prayer for the Holy Spirit; study of the words on the page; and study of the Bible in light of all that afflicts us in the life of faith. Read the Psalm, section by section, and discuss these emphases in light of your experience in the life of faith.
2. Psalm 119 acknowledges that when God's Word takes root and begins to grow in a person, the arrogant devil will attack and accuse in order to destroy the joy and confidence of faith (see especially verses 89-136). The attacks of the devil backfire because they only serve to make us real students of the Bible. By his assaults, the devil teaches us to seek and love God's Word (see especially verses 97-104). Discuss this theme of the Psalm in light of your own life experience.
3. Psalm 51, Luther contends, establishes the subject matter of theology. Theology is about sinful humanity and the justifying God. Read the Psalm and discuss how this theme is expressed.
4. Consider the theme of Psalm 51 in light of David's experience as reported in 2 Samuel 11:1-12:25. Discuss the theme of the Psalm in the light of your own experience.
5. In Biblical imagination, according to Luther, sin is understood primarily in terms of human discontent to live a down-to-earth life. This is the way Luther expresses it:

Humans by nature are unable to want God to be God. Indeed, they want to be God, and do not want God to be God ... As miserable sinners we are real human beings in the eyes of God,

*whereas, when we try to be good we are but "unhappy and presumptuous gods."*⁶

Discuss Luther's view of sin in light of your own experience.

The Scripture passages for this session are Psalm 119 and Psalm 51. It is helpful to approach the passages under discussion by asking questions. The questions below are designed to expand and deepen theological discussion of the material before us in this session:

1. What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about the passage?
2. What additional background knowledge would help me better engage the passage?
3. What does the passage promise to faith?
4. What does the passage demand of faith?
5. How do you see the relationship between the promise and demand of the passage?
6. To what parts of the Small Catechism can you make connections?
7. How does the Small Catechism help to better understand the passage under discussion?

Pastor Thompson is available via email to offer additional discussion suggestions. Contact him at:
thompsonv@gonzaga.edu