

reading the Bible with Luther



Introduction

by Virgil Thompson

Martin Luther and the Bible

In service to his neighbors Martin Luther wore many hats. He was a husband, father, preacher, scholar, teacher, reformer, mentor and counselor, as well as a prolific author. The German edition of his works numbers around 700,000 pages in 100 volumes. Translators continue to labor away at the mountain of Luther's writings; so far, we have over 50 volumes in English.

In addition to 400 major theological works, many hymns, the Small and Large Catechisms, letters of spiritual and ecclesial counsel, Luther wrote, preached and lectured on the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Even when Luther was not explicitly preaching or teaching the Scriptures, his writings were informed and shaped in conversation with the Bible.

Luther's interest in the Bible was not limited to his responsibilities as pastor and teacher of the church. His life in all its aspects was animated by the Word of God as he encountered it in the words of the Bible. In the course of his scholarly study, the promise of God *for* sinners and not *against* them broke through to him.

The Promise of Reading the Bible with Luther

From the Bible, Luther learned that sinners do not earn the favor of God by reforming their ways, doing good deeds, and/or believing the correct doctrines. Rather, God—out of the goodness of His heart—does the world the favor of putting sinners out of business and bringing forth a new creation free to be of some earthly good to the creation and the neighbors with whom they share it.¹ As Paul says,

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly ... God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. — Romans 5:6, 8

Or as Jesus explains, “I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17).

The promise of God for sinners not only turned Luther's understanding of the Bible upside down; it turned his entire life upside down and inside out. From that time forward his life and work was animated by the desire to get the word of God's promise out to sinners, that it might do for them what it had done for him.

Luther's aspiration met with remarkable success. In his day, the printing presses could scarcely keep up with the demand for his commentaries, lectures and sermons. This snippet of prayer from Albrecht Dürer, an artist who lived at the same time as Luther, explains why. Uncertain whether Luther was alive or not, Dürer prayed, “O God, if Luther is dead, who will henceforth deliver the Holy Gospel to us with such clarity?” Today, Luther's writings on the Bible are as engaging as ever. His proclamation of the gospel is as promising for faith as ever.

I am delighted at this opportunity to share with readers of *Connections* some of what I have received from “reading the Bible with Luther” over the past 35 years of my own service to the church. Our series will focus on the high points of the Biblical story of faith:

- **Creation** (*Genesis 1 and 2*),
- **Human Discontent and Unbelief** (*Genesis 3 – 11*),
- **First Believers** (*Genesis 12 – 50*),
- **Exodus** (*Exodus 1 – 20*),
- **Promised Land** (*Joshua and Judges*),
- **Kings and Prophets** (*1 Samuel – 2 Kings, Major and Minor Prophets*),
- **Exile and Diaspora** (*Daniel, Esther, more from the Major and Minor Prophets*),
- **Story of Jesus** (*Gospels*), and
- **Story of the Church** (*Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of Paul*).

From each of these great chapters in the Biblical story of faith, our series will feature readings that provide a sense of the sweep of the story and its promise for the life of faith. In a nutshell—as Luther frequently summarized it—the Biblical story of faith is the drama of the human being “*guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of ... the sinner.*”² This drama fairly explodes from every page of the Bible.

Generally, when people think about reading the Bible, they imagine that the trick is to find some way to make the story come alive. For Luther, it worked just the opposite. **We** do not give life to the story of the Bible. The story of the Bible is **God** giving life to us “clods”!

Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

— Genesis 2:7

This continues to be the promise of an encounter with the Word of God as it is heard in the words of the Bible. We have God’s promise:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth ... so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. — Isaiah 55:10–11

This is all to say, as Luther explains the *Apostles’ Creed*, Christians read the Bible because we believe that through the words of the Bible, God, the Holy Spirit, speaks to enliven and sustain us and all believers in the life of faith.³

Until Next Time

So until next time, I leave you with the Biblical passages that have been before us in this issue:

- **Romans 5:6–11**
- **Mark 2:15–17**
- **Isaiah 55:10–11**
- **Genesis 2:7**

These passages tell us who we are as readers of the Bible. And they spell out the promise of reading the Bible. As you reread the passages consider:

1. How does the Bible view its readers? What assumptions does the Bible make about readers?
2. What is the promise of reading the Bible?

Looking Ahead to the Next Issue

In the next issue we will explore Psalm 119, from which Luther learned to read the Bible for faith. And we will explore as well Psalm 51, from which Luther learned the true subject matter of theology. In other words, Luther learned to read the Bible from reading the Bible. And that is the first thing that we, too, learn from reading the Bible with Luther.

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

Notes

- ¹ Note Luther’s emphasis in the Small Catechism’s explanation of the *Apostles’ Creed*. God creates and sustains the life of creation solely out of “*pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!*” God redeems sinners from sin, death and the power of the devil, “*not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.*” God calls, gathers, enlightens, makes holy and keeps us in the true faith— all out of the goodness of His heart. See *The Book of Concord*. Eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 354–56.
- ² *Luther’s Works*. Ed. by J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960) 12:311.
- ³ See his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed, in *The Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 355:6.
- ⁴ *Luther’s Works* 34:287.

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Select: Reading the Bible with Luther - Intro

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reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study



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Introduction

Study and Prayer in Light of our Afflictions

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

For your continuing reflection and discussion, Luther makes a couple of suggestions:

1. Since the days of the twelve apostles, study of the Bible is best done with a partner or in a small group.
2. Reflection and discussion should be undertaken prayerfully. As Luther admonished,
Kneel down in your little room (Matt. 6:6)
and pray ... that God may give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding.⁴
3. You will find it helpful to have available the Small Catechism as the companion volume to the Bible. The Small Catechism squeezes the juicy essence of God's word for faith from the "apple tree" of the Bible.

Generally, it is helpful to approach the passage under discussion by asking questions. Each installment of our series will offer passages of Scripture, followed by sample questions for discussion.

Reflect on these passages of Scripture from the introduction on the previous pages:

- **Romans 5:6–11**
- **Mark 2:15–17**
- **Isaiah 55:10–11**
- **Genesis 2:7**

Consider these suggested sample questions to get your discussion started:

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 understand better the passage under discussion?

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