



Prayer That Prevails¹

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“Boldness is effective—even against heaven” (*Sanhedrin* 105a)

The Bible affirms many times over that the prayers of God’s people often prevail upon God. The Old Testament in particular is full of examples of such prayers, all of which led Luther to the question, “Why, then, are we so remiss in regard to prayer? Why are we without faith to such an extent and so fainthearted, as though our prayer amounted to nothing?”² This is a failure on our part, not only to obey a command (“Ask...”), but also to apprehend a promise (“and you will receive”).³ God actually intends that faith grasp the promise that “in the name of Jesus God never refuses,” and this is the evangelical basis for the idea that prayer prevails upon God.⁴

In a stunning statement, Luther argues that many Old Testament prayers teach us that in response to prayer God wants to disregard his own will and act

¹We dedicate this article to Steven D. Paulson, whose work on the hidden God has proven to be formative for both of us.

²*Luther’s Works* (hereafter *LW*) (Saint Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958–1986) 3:289. See also Mary Jane Haemig, “Prayer as Talking Back to God in Luther’s Genesis Lectures,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (2009) 270–295.

³Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 348.

⁴*Ibid.*, 349.

The prayer that prevails is the prayer to God against God, the prayer that holds God to the promises of the gospel despite all appearances to the contrary, the prayer that God wants to answer.

upon our petition based upon God's promise.⁵ Or, as Luther put it in his comments about Jacob's conflict with God at the Jabbok, "Such examples teach us that faith should not yield or cease urging or pressing on even when it is already feeling God's wrath and not only death and sin. This is the power and strength of the Spirit."⁶ Jacob's New Testament counterpart, Luther argues, is the Canaanite woman of Matt 15:21–28, who refuses to be silent at Jesus' rebuff. She provides an example, teaching us that, "Even if He hides Himself in a room in the house and does not want access to be given to anyone, do not draw back but follow.... For this is the highest sacrifice, not to cease praying and seeking until we conquer Him."⁷

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In the face of divine absence and silence, the believer is not to despair, but to pursue; not to give in, but to insist; not to let go, but to cling. The pray-er is one who, insisting upon God's generosity, doggedly hopes and cries out for "the unexpected and the impossible."⁸

MOSAIC INTERCESSION IN EXODUS 32

In Exod 32 the future of YHWH's newly established covenant with Israel comes under threat when the Israelites demand "gods that will go before us" (Exod 32:1).⁹ Aaron, unwilling to stand up to the throng, fashions a calf of molten gold. The irony of this situation is not lost on *Exodus Rabbah*, a Jewish midrashic text, which declares that "R. Levi said: While Israel were standing below engraving idols to provoke their Creator to anger.... God sat on High engraving for them tablets that would give them life" (*Exodus Rabbah* 41:1).

Infuriated by this apostasy, YHWH tells Moses to leave him alone, "so that my anger might blaze against them and devour them and so that I might make you into a great nation" (Exod 32:10). Moses, however, is unwilling to allow YHWH to retreat into divine hiddenness. Instead, in an act of "faithful disagreement,"¹⁰ Moses says:

Why, YHWH, does your anger blaze against your people whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the

⁵LW 3:289–290; Martin Luther, *Rogate Sermon* (1524), WA 15:548ff.; Haemig, "Prayer as Talking Back," 270–295; Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 349.

⁶Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545), LW 6:139.

⁷LW 6:140.

⁸LW 3:159.

⁹Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are our own.

¹⁰See Michael Widmer, *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer: A Study of Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 94.

Egyptians say, “He brought them out because of evil to kill them among the mountains and to wipe them out from the face of the earth.” Turn away from your burning anger and relent concerning the evil intended for your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your very self, saying to them: “I will multiply your seed like the stars of the heavens. What’s more, this entire land, which I promised to bestow upon your seed, they will inherit forever.” (Exod 32:11–13)

Moses’ speech/prayer offers several reasons why God should not destroy Israel: First, Moses appeals to YHWH’s reputation, especially among the Egyptians. Second, Moses makes reference to YHWH’s promises to the ancestors (see, for example, Gen 12:1–3; 15:1–21) and YHWH’s liberation of Israel from Egypt.¹¹ These form the promissory basis of Moses’ appeal to divine mercy. With “history” and promise on his side, “the one formerly commanded by God now responds with commands of his own”:¹² “turn away...remember” (vv. 12–13).

Numerous rabbinic texts expand on this important dialogue:

Address: Master of the Universe!

Accusation: They broke the beginning of the Commandment, “You shall have no other gods”...but You seek to break its end “Showing loving kindness [*hesed*] for thousands of my beloved” [Israel]....And how many generations [have there been] from Abraham until now? Seven....And if You cannot show *hesed* for seven [generations], how are You going to show *hesed* for two thousand [generations]? Thus, they have nullified the first clause of the Commandment, and You seek to nullify its second clause. (*Exodus Rabbah* 44:9; cf. Exod 20:3–6)¹³

According to *Exodus Rabbah*, the first commandment (Exod 20:3–6) not only places obligations on Israel, it also places obligations on YHWH. YHWH promised to show *hesed* for thousands of generations, making it therefore wrong to lose patience after only seven generations! *Berakhot* 32a draws a comparison between Moses’ prayer and Jacob’s wrestling match at the Jabbok (Gen 32:24–32): According to R. Abbahu Moses grabbed YHWH like a man, saying: “Sovereign of the Universe! I will not let you go until you forgive and pardon them” (*Berakhot* 32a).¹⁴ Instead of seeking a personal blessing, as Jacob does (Gen 32:26), Moses asks YHWH to forgive and turn from the disaster he planned (Exod 32:12–14). These later Jewish interpreters understood that prayers—even prayers that are contrary to YHWH’s will—can and do prevail.

¹¹See Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991) 285–286. Cf. Widmer, *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer*, 107.

¹²Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 137.

¹³This translation and citation are taken from Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990) 55.

¹⁴Translation and citation are from *ibid.*, 56.

1 SAMUEL 1:1–2:11: HANNAH

Hannah is among Israel's most cherished mothers. Like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and even the mother of Samsom, she is among those afflicted with closed wombs, who, nonetheless, brought forth children of promise. Hannah suffers not only from a closed womb (1 Sam 1:5) but also from an abusive rival wife (1 Sam 1:6), making her problems both interpersonal and theological. And it is the theological nature of Hannah's problem that also provides her with the opportunity for deliverance: the God who denies her fecundity can, if moved by prayer, generate life from lifelessness, for the God of Israel "kills and makes alive" (1 Sam 2:6). The remarkable claim made by this story, then, is that Israel's royal "history" (Samuel-Kings) turns on the prayerful outpourings of a childless woman.

Hannah, however, persists in prayer: "In a bitter state, she prayed to YHWH, weeping continuously" (1 Sam 1:10). Eyes brimming with tears, she "takes herself to the temple and challenges the Deity with a solemn vow: if he will give her one son, she will give him back forever."¹⁵

YHWH of Hosts if you look on the misery of your maidservant and remember me, not forgetting your maidservant, and will give to your maidservant a male seed, then I will give him to YHWH all the days of his life, and no razor will touch his head. (1 Sam 1:11)

Hannah seeks to force YHWH out of hiding and into action: look, remember, don't forget! In the process, Hannah's appearance becomes so disfigured that Eli thinks she is drunk (1 Sam 1:13–16). Realizing his error, Eli exchanges his chastisement with a benediction: "Go in peace and may the God of Israel grant you your request that you requested from him" (1 Sam 1:17). Despite the fact that Eli's words contradict Hannah's reality, she takes comfort in them, knowing that they were also God's words: "her face was no longer downcast." Ultimately, Hannah's trust in these words was not in vain: "Elkanah knew his wife Hannah and YHWH *remembered* her. . . . Hannah conceived and she bore a son" (1 Sam 1:19–20).

IN LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

The notion that one would be so bold as to press against God in prayer—powerfully demonstrated in the narratives about Moses and Hannah—is not an isolated comment in Luther's theological writings, but one that is in concert with the whole of his thought. For help in describing the function of how the believer could or even should pray against God, we turn to the insights of Luther scholar and theologian Oswald Bayer.

When taken at face value, Luther's claim that "God wants to disregard his own will and do ours"¹⁶ seems like a license for a "name it and claim it" theology through which we might pray with Janice Joplin for that new Mercedes-Benz. Is

¹⁵A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011) 30.

¹⁶LW 3:290.

this what the Reformer advocates about prayer? In order to read Luther correctly on God's desire to do "our will" in prayer, we need to understand something of the place prayer occupies in Luther's theology. For Luther, prayer is part of the very method of theology, something that relates directly to God's promise in the gospel as well as to the experience of the contradiction of that promise, and to its final eschatological fulfillment. Moses, Jacob, and Hannah prevailed upon God in prayer precisely because their relationship with YHWH was wrapped up in YHWH's promise.

Bayer demonstrates that prayer is part of Luther's broader approach to theology and forms part of a particularly Lutheran way of doing theology. Bayer argues that theology done in this way is not a precise science nor an artistic feeling but an experiential wisdom in which all Christians participate through a method of *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), *tentatio* (*Anfechtung*, "agonizing struggle") that combines both diligent study and real, lived experience.¹⁷

For Luther prayer and meditation are not humanly produced, introspective spiritual exercises but the particular response of the human who is encountered by God in God's objective and external word. Luther thus anchors the believer's activity of prayer in the gospel.

By incorporating prayer into his experiential method of theology, Luther nuances the meaning of prayer in the life of the believer. As Bayer helps us understand, for Luther prayer and meditation are not humanly produced, introspective spiritual exercises but the particular response of the human who is encountered by God in God's objective and external word. By placing prayer alongside meditation, which is the study of God's word, Luther thus anchors the believer's activity of prayer in the gospel.¹⁸ In a similar way, the experience of *Anfechtung* also characterizes the kind of prayer that is formative in the life and theology of the believer. The agonizing struggle of *Anfechtung* is not simply a generic human depression or fear; it is the everyday life experience of the contradiction of God's word of promise. Prayer then is the believer's response not only to meditating on the word of the gospel but also to the experience of that word of promise's contradiction in *Anfechtung*.¹⁹

For Luther, God's promise, expressed in both the Old and New Testaments, to be gracious, merciful, and forgiving is what theology is all about. The promise of

¹⁷Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 16–17; Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, trans. and ed. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 32–34. Bayer gleans this from Luther's brief exposition of Ps 119 in his *Preface to the German Writings of 1539* (LW 34:285–287), though this method is by no means isolated to this text alone.

¹⁸Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 44–49, 52, 55–56.

¹⁹Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 63–64; Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 20–21, 35–37.

justification by faith alone that is God's radical gift given apart from the law forms not only the center of Luther's own theology but also, in the reformer's estimation, the true subject matter of all theology.²⁰ This does not restrict theology for Luther to a solipsistic discussion of the believer's personal faith in Christ but, instead, opens up all of creation as the place where theology takes place.²¹ For Luther, the promise of God is a performative word that does what it says; it forgives sins and grants a new relationship of friendship with God.²² Yet, as Bayer reminds us, God has also promised that creation itself will be renewed and that all evil, suffering, and sorrow will come to an end.²³

The acute problem for Christian faith in the real world is not the intellectual idea of the problem of evil but the very real, lived experience of evil and suffering that contradict God's justifying and re-creating promise. God has promised, "See, I am making all things new" (Rev 21:5), but of course we do not see, and therein lies the problem. We have a promise from God, but the contradiction of that promise is real.

Of course, there are many intellectual and practical ways of trying to get out of this tension between the promise and its contradiction. Yet whether they try to get God off the hook for evil by somehow making God less than omnipotent or omniscient or making evil less real, they do not actually solve the problem. In the words of Luther: "The gouty foot laughs at such doctoring."²⁴ The reason for this failure of theodicy is twofold: First, our experience of evil, pain, and suffering is too real and too near to be satiated by such answers. Second, such answers do not address the real problem. The real problem is not a philosophical construct about evil and the existence of God, but the experience of the contradiction of a direct promise. Like God's people in the Old Testament, we Christians too know God through a promise. In Jesus Christ God has promised to be a God of grace and mercy, to be God *for us* and to renew creation. We have received this promise in baptism and continue to receive it in preaching, reading scripture, absolution, and Holy Communion. Nevertheless, almost everything around us contradicts this.

With natural disasters, starvation, civil wars, economic injustice, terrorism, the pending threat of ecological catastrophe, and the possibility of thermonuclear war, how can one not feel the contradiction of God's promise? Moreover, evil and suffering are not just talking points gleaned from the media. We all have felt per-

²⁰Martin Luther, *Psalm 51* (1538), LW 12:311; Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 37–39; Oswald Bayer, "Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology," trans. Christine Helmer, *Lutheran Quarterly* 15/3 (2001) 287; Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 98.

²¹Bayer, "Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology," 273, 288.

²²Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), LW 36:37–39; Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:226–236.

²³Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 106–108, 116–117; Oswald Bayer, *Schöpfung als Anrede: Zu einer Hermeneutik der Schöpfung*, 2. erweiterte Auflage (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990) 62.

²⁴Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 2000) 92. Cf. Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, ed. Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 34, 44–45.

sonally the sting of the promise's contradiction. Then, inevitably, the question comes: "Why did God...?" or "Why didn't God...?"

When these questions come, our immediate response is to try to hold God accountable in some way for what has happened. Some might find this reaction to be impious, sinful, or even a first step to losing one's faith. Yet, there is something in this accusation against or interrogation of God that is deeply motivated by faith; evil is only a problem for faith in God's promise. In this context, prayer becomes a response to the experience of the contradiction of the promise. Both Bayer and Luther locate the activity of God in *Anfechtung* within the realm of the hiddenness of God that is completely inscrutable and that works all things that come to pass, even evil.²⁵ This kind of divine hiddenness cannot be uncovered by any means, but that does not mean that one cannot do anything against it. This is precisely the point at which the kind of prayer that prevails comes into play, prayer that trusts in God's promise.

*the kind of prayer that uses God's promise against God in
the struggle is the prayer of lament*

Bayer highlights how Luther describes Jacob as trusting in the promise when he wrestles with God on the banks of the Jabbok. The hidden God, says Luther, pounces upon Jacob and attacks him not only physically but also with words, words aimed at causing Jacob to doubt God's promise.²⁶ This, says Bayer, is what happens when we as believers undergo the contradiction of the promise in evil and suffering. We are seized by the experience of *Anfechtung*, and the only thing we can do is to grasp the promise of God and fight back with it, struggle against the hidden God.²⁷ Hence, Luther states that we are participatory witnesses to "God against God": the hidden God who works all things against the revealed God of the promise of the gospel in Christ, and the revealed God of that promise overcoming the hidden God who assaults faith in the promise.²⁸

Luther's idea that in prayer God will do our bidding should be understood in this context. The kind of prayer that uses God's promise against God in the struggle is the prayer of lament. Lament is a prayer that complains about the current state of affairs and uses God's promise as evidence against God, petitioning God to do something about evil and suffering based on that promise.²⁹ This kind of prayer comes not from the desire to have all of one's fantasies come true but from belief in the promise and the very real experience of its contradiction in evil. In this kind of

²⁵Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 169–171; Martin Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–1530), *LW* 17:278–279; *LW* 6:135–136, 139; Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 11, 201–202.

²⁶*LW* 6:135.

²⁷Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 205–206.

²⁸*LW* 6:145–151; Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545), *LW* 8:3–10.

²⁹Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 11; Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010) 139–140.

prayer, we can cry out to God, even against God, questioning why events of evil and suffering are happening, and how long it will be before God makes good on God's promise to do something about them.³⁰

How can that be permissible though? Is it not sinful and disrespectful to address God in this way? Terence Fretheim rightly observes that the audacity to confront God in this form of prayer, known as lament, comes not from impious attitudes but from scripture. The psalmist, Job, Abraham, Moses, Hannah, Jeremiah, and even the crucified Jesus Christ himself dare to confront God in the midst of evil and suffering.³¹ Why do these biblical pray-ers lament so? Because the pray-er that laments to God about evil and suffering presupposes trust in God's promise and God's ability to act upon that promise.³² As Steven Paulson notes, "Lament is only possible when you have a promise."³³

We expectantly await the promised eschatological renewal of all things. Yet, it is this expectant eschatological hope that motivates our lament in the present. Since we appeal to the promise in lament, we expect lament to be answered.

But what is the basis for this trust? Can God, will God, actually do something to answer such prayers? Or are they as useless as expressing the desire for a new Mercedes-Benz to some divine Santa Claus who fulfills all of our whims?

As Bayer reminds us, faith is the trust for and the hope in things not yet seen.³⁴ We still expectantly await the promised eschatological renewal of all things. Yet, it is this expectant eschatological hope that motivates our lament in the present.³⁵ Since we appeal to the promise in lament, we expect lament to be answered. In lament, we anticipate the ultimate eschatological fulfillment of the promise full of hope. Bayer describes the existence of lament in the context of such hope as "living and waiting in haste."³⁶ In this context, our prayer is nothing other than crying out to God, "Maranatha!" ("Come, oh Lord!"). In this kind of prayer, we cry to God, motivated by a sure faith and hope that God will renew all things.³⁷

The experience of evil and suffering can only be brought to an end eschatologically, but in the meantime, we cry out to God in prayer to hurry things up and

³⁰Rolf A. Jacobson and Karl N. Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Discovery and Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013) 43.

³¹Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 102–103.

³²Jacobson and Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms*, 44–45.

³³Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (London: T&T Clark International, 2011) 211.

³⁴Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 334. Cf. Heb 11:1; 2 Cor 5:7.

³⁵Oswald Bayer, "Toward a Theology of Lament," in *Caritas et Reformatio: Essays on Church and Society in Honor of Carter Lindberg*, ed. David Whitford (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002) 212.

³⁶Oswald Bayer, "Mercy from the Heart," trans. Jonathan Mumme, *Logia* 19 (Eastertide, 2010) 31.

³⁷Joshua C. Miller, "The Hidden God in the Lutheran Theology of Oswald Bayer," Ph.D. diss. (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Luther Seminary, 2012) 371.

put an end to that experience. In this kind of prayer, we can be sure that God does want to do our willing, as Luther says, because our will is formed by the promise of God. As Bayer says, this prayer will actually move God to action, for it “brings a passionate hope for the consummation of the world, in which God himself definitively brings justice, and this answer to lament will bring *Anfechtung* to an end.”³⁸ The prayer that prevails upon God is a heartfelt “Maranatha!”

Such prayer is the expression of hope in the face of a seemingly hopeless situation. Among our greatest examples are Hannah and Moses, whose dauntless prayers instruct us to persist doggedly in prayer. Prevailing prayer springs from faith that God wills to do our will, when our will is formed by meditating on God’s promise in the midst of the experience of evil and suffering. That’s the real way to pray, and as Luther says, the way in which every one of us who is baptized into Jesus Christ is a theologian. In the midst of injustice, evil, and suffering, we can grasp the promise of justification and a renewed creation and hold it in God’s face in prayer. We have the privilege to claim that promise in spite of what God seems to be otherwise up to in the world. In so praying we will not get that Mercedes-Benz, but we will get salvation, the strength to continue in faith, and the eschatological healing of a broken creation will be ours through Jesus Christ. ⊕

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³⁸Bayer, *Schöpfung als Anrede*, 139. Translation is my own (Miller).