



## Lessons on Lament from the Lutheran Past

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I was first drawn to the study of church history because I believed it could help me decide what I should believe and how I should live as a Christian. I was an undergraduate at the time and was encountering many different, and at times conflicting, opinions about Christian beliefs and practices. I found this experience to be disorienting and threatening, but also exhilarating. I had arrived at college with a rather ahistorical understanding of the faith, a problem that afflicts many American Christians. I had heard about Augustine and Luther in sermons, for example, but I still lived with the illusion that there was a direct line between the Bible and my local church with its rather parochial theology. One of the great gifts of my undergraduate career was learning about the “great cloud of witnesses” we have in the saints of the past. I discovered that there were faithful Christians between the apostle Paul and me from whom I had much to learn—a real epiphany for me! I remember being completely captivated by the letters of Ignatius of Antioch on his way to martyrdom in Rome. Such ardent faith! And yet it was expressed in ways that were frequently foreign to my theological sensibilities at the time. I had much to reconsider. In time, I read the works of many other Christians in the past and gradually learned to interpret Scripture and do theology within the “communion of the saints,” which led to a significant expansion of my theological vision.

*Christians live surrounded by a “great cloud of witnesses” to the faith, those who lived with and struggled with their faith ahead of us. Using the vivid example of one such witness from the sixteenth century, we learn from him how to face, as a Christian, the unavoidable traumas of our finite human existence, with faith in the infinite God.*

But my doctoral program urged on me a different approach to the study of the past. We were taught to cultivate “historical mindedness” and to realize that “the past is a foreign country.” We did not study the past in search of wisdom for the present, certainly not in the first place; rather, we studied the past as the past, seeking to understand how it has shaped the present. We learned to observe and respect the “alterity”—that is, the otherness—of the past. I am grateful for these lessons, for there is much that is good and true in them. I really had not unlearned my native ahistorical outlook during my undergraduate education; I had simply broadened the number of voices in my ahistorical now. My doctoral program made a professional historian out of me. But it also separated me from the sources that had meant so much to me during my undergraduate years.

Since completing my doctoral studies, I have sought to reclaim my initial impulse for studying the past, while also attending to the important lessons I learned in graduate school about the dangers of presentism in historical inquiry. Today, I still seek wisdom in the past for the life of faith in the present, but I do so with great care and caution.

Which brings me to the topic of this essay. I have recently completed work on a book that has allowed me as never before to integrate history-as-the-search-for-wisdom with history-as-the-scholarly-study-of-the-past. The book is titled *A Widower’s Lament: The “Pious Meditations” of Johann Christoph Oelhofafen*.<sup>1</sup> It consists of a translation from the original German and Latin into English of a previously unknown early modern Lutheran prayer diary. It also includes a historical, historiographical, and theological introduction, explanatory notes along the way, and an epilogue. Completing the project has required all the scholarly expertise I could muster, demanding—among other things—deep knowledge of early modern German and Latin, intimate familiarity with the hymnody and devotional literature of the day, a firm grasp of the political and economic history of the time, and a nuanced understanding of the “emotional scripts”—that is, the unspoken cultural rules about emotional expression—in early modern Germany. The project has also required considerable proficiency in early modern Lutheran theology, especially the internecine battles it experienced in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

But the project has additionally offered to me—and now offers to readers of the book—a great deal of wisdom about how to live faithfully as a Christian in the midst of loss and suffering. It has gospel lessons to teach any who have ears to hear them. It is, finally, these lessons that have proven most important to me as a Christian scholar. In what follows, I share some of these lessons from this remarkable source.

First, a word about Johann Christoph Oelhofafen (1574–1631) is in order. He was a layman who lived in Nürnberg, the first imperial city to adopt the Lutheran Reformation (1525). Johann Christoph came from a prominent family and received

<sup>1</sup> Ronald K. Rittgers, *A Widower’s Lament: The “Pious Meditations” of Johann Christoph Oelhofafen* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021).

a humanistic education at the nearby Altdorf Academy. A stellar student, he then studied law, traveled extensively, and eventually secured a post as legal counsel to the council of patricians that ruled Nürnberg. From time to time, Johann Christoph also rendered legal service to the emperor and his representatives. A bibliophile and lifelong learner, he possessed a personal library of some 1,900 volumes.

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Johann Christoph was a committed Lutheran. During his lifetime, Nürnberg moved in a Philippist direction, while the Altdorf Academy was home to at least a few Socinian professors. Johann Christoph opposed the anti-Trinitarians in Altdorf, and although he was an advocate of Melanchthonian humanism, there is no evidence he was a full-blown Philippist; indeed, he was likely a more conservative Lutheran. He was personal friends with Johann Saubert (1592–1646), a Lutheran pastor first in Altdorf and then in Nürnberg. Saubert was interested in Lutheran Orthodoxy and the mystically inflected piety of Johann Arndt (1555–1621), both of which he learned from his teacher Johann Gerhard (1582–1637).<sup>2</sup> (As recent scholarship has shown, Lutheran Orthodoxy and Arndtian piety were not mutually exclusive in this period.) Johann Christoph was also a musician—like Luther, he played the lute—and was well versed in Lutheran hymnody. Additionally, he was acquainted with Lutheran devotional literature, including the works of the talented *Seelsorger*, Martin Moller (1547–1606).<sup>3</sup>

On May 25, 1601, Johann Christoph married Anna Maria Harsdörffer (b. 1582), who came from a patrician family in Nürnberg—she was his social better. The couple appears to have had an especially rich life together; certainly Johann Christoph thought so. He developed a pet name for Anna Maria that conveyed his sense of the deep union that existed between them: AMICO (Anna Maria Iohann Christoph Oelhafen). He also tells us that they had a shared love of music—Anna Maria would sing hymns and songs as her husband accompanied her on the lute.<sup>4</sup> Anna Maria gave birth to thirteen children, five of whom died in infancy. The cumulative effects of so many pregnancies in eighteen years of marriage took their toll on her. Not long after Anna Maria's final delivery, she became seriously ill,

<sup>2</sup> See Johann Anselm Steiger, *Johann Gerhard (1582–1637): Studien zu Theologie und Frömmigkeit des Kirchenvaters der lutherischen Orthodoxie* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1997). On Arndt, see Thomas Illg, "Johann Arndt," in *Protestants and Mysticism in Reformation Europe*, ed. Ronald K. Rittgers and Vincent Evener (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 309–27.

<sup>3</sup> On Moller, see Ronald K. Rittgers, "Mystical Union and Spiritual Desire in Late Reformation Devotion: The Case of Martin Moller's *The Great Mystery* (1595)," *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 17, no. 3 (2015): 214–29.

<sup>4</sup> Rittgers, *A Widower's Lament*, 128.

vomiting day and night. Her strength quickly waned. None of the age's remedies worked, and her condition only worsened. Johann Christoph summoned his two oldest sons home from school—like their father, they studied at the Altdorf Academy. He also called for a pastor to attend to his wife in what he feared were her final hours. His fears were soon realized. Not long before she passed away, Anna Maria spoke her final words to her husband: "Oh darling, help me just once more out of this torment!"<sup>5</sup> Shortly thereafter, at 12:45 a.m. on February 13, 1619, she suffered a stroke and died in Johann Christoph's arms.

He was crushed by his loss; he felt that a piece of his heart had been torn away.<sup>6</sup> To console himself, he immediately began keeping a prayer diary of sorts in which he poured out his heart to God. Johann Christoph eventually had the vellum pages on which he wrote his reflections gilded and bound in red-tooled leather. He titled the volume *Pious Meditations on the, Alas, Most Sorrowful Bereavement*. It contains some seventy handwritten German and Latin entries—the German ones predominate. The entries, which cover the span of one year, take a couple of forms: original prayers based on the lectionary readings for a given Sunday or feast day; hymns—some original to Johann Christoph, some copied verbatim from other sources, some a mix of both; and poems—again, some original, some borrowed, some mixed. Johann Christoph wrote—or better, composed—the *Pious Meditations* with a very small audience in mind: himself and his God, in the first place, but also his family and close friends. Given that the volume is a work of art in its own right, Johann Christoph likely had his posterity in mind too. In addition to the handsome cover and gilded pages, the volume contains a portrait of Johann Christoph, renderings of his coat of arms and epitaph, and a drawing of "Patientia" (Lady Patience)—the portrait and the drawing were done by well-known Nürnberg artists. Still, he never had the work printed or published, and it does not appear in any of the summaries of his life and works. His works on jurisprudence appear, but not his *Pious Meditations*. After his death, it was likely handed down from one generation of his family to the next, along with his other personal effects. I was fortunate enough to discover the work while investigating sources in the Oelhafen family archive, which is housed in the German National Museum in Nürnberg. I am the first scholar to work on this source, which provides remarkable insight into life and devotion in the Lutheran past. It also contains important lessons for the present. I will mention four that I believe are worthy of emulation.

Johann Christoph was well prepared to face his grief, at least as well prepared as any Christian of his day (or ours) could be. A lifetime of reading and meditating on Scripture had equipped him for the spiritual battle that his wife's death would unleash in him. One source tells us that Johann Christoph began and ended each day with Scripture. He had heeded the advice of Lutheran pastor-theologians such as Johann Spangenberg (1484–1550), who urged Christians to become spiritual

<sup>5</sup> Rittgers, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Rittgers, 57.

knights.<sup>7</sup> (Lutherans, of course, were not the first to employ the image of the spiritual knight; Erasmus had done so before the Reformation in his *Handbook of the Christian Knight*.) A central concern of this knightly training was to prepare oneself for death, both one's own and that of one's family and friends. In other words, to be a Christian knight was to engage in the *ars moriendi* (art or craft of dying), a late medieval tradition that Protestants adopted and adapted to fit their theology.<sup>8</sup> The idea was to arm oneself spiritually for death before it arrived by meditating on one's end—and on human mortality as such—so that it did not catch one unawares when it arrived. One was to equip oneself to face death and the dread it could bring by meditating on the consoling promises of the gospel, allowing them to be firmly planted in one's heart. Scripture was thus the Christian knight's most important weapon. As Spangenberg put it, "You should impress (*einbilden*) some comforting passages from Scripture and the gospel on your memory, passages to use against all temptations. Collect them as provisions [for the journey] and always carry them with you in your heart, just as a soldier carries his arrows in the quiver and has them ready to use whenever he needs them."<sup>9</sup> Johann Christoph's quiver was full of Scripture-arrows, which he uses quite effectively throughout the *Pious Meditations*. Scripture is by far and away the most important source in his prayer diary; he usually provides the verses he cites in the margins. As noted above, many entries are original prayers based on the Sunday or feast day lections.

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But Johann Christoph did not simply know Scripture—he indwelled it and allowed it to indwell him. He was Scripture-soaked. In the *Pious Meditations*, he becomes the royal official in John 4:46–54, waiting for divine visitation and healing; he is the debtor in Matthew 18:24 who owes God ten thousand talents.<sup>10</sup> Unsurprisingly, Johann Christoph draws especially on the Psalms and Job. Echoing the Old Testament saint, he prays, "O dear God, I also asked you for a God-fearing, virtuous, chaste, and pious spouse, which you gave to me and also took away. Now, may your name be blessed [Job 1:21]."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Johann Spangenberg, *A Booklet of Comfort for the Sick, & On the Christian Knight by Johann Spangenberg* (1548), trans. Robert Kolb (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> See Austra Reinis, *Reforming the Art of Dying: The ars moriendi in the German Reformation (1519–1528)* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Spangenberg, *A Booklet of Comfort*, 61.

<sup>10</sup> Rittgers, *A Widower's Lament*, 202–6.

<sup>11</sup> Rittgers, 93. On the interpretation of Job in early modern Lutheranism, see Ronald K. Rittgers, "Job in the German Reformation," in *A Companion to Job in the Middle Ages*, ed. Franklin T. Harkins and Aaron Canty (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 254–86.

In addition to arming himself with the consoling promises of the Word, Johann Christoph had also taken to heart all that Scripture has to say about human finitude. Even before Anna Maria's death, he was keenly aware of his own mortality. In 1599, after a bloodletting accident that nearly cost him his life, he had his epitaph prepared—at the time he was twenty-four years old. A revised version of this same epitaph appears in the *Pious Meditations*; a further revised version marks his final resting place in the St. Johannisfriedhof in Nürnberg.

Second, along with cultivating a deep life with Scripture, Johann Christoph had nourished his soul for years with the sung Word; he was even in the habit of composing his own hymns. In the *Pious Meditations*, he makes frequent recourse to poetry and hymnody to express and assuage his grief. He understood the consoling effects of music and verse for troubled souls. Portions of the *Pious Meditations* are given over entirely to poems and hymns. For significant stretches of his yearlong lament, Johann Christoph found that verse rather than prose could best express his sorrow. His stock of Scripture-soaked verse served him well in his grief. Of particular interest are the hymns he reproduces that complain about those who expect grieving Christians to conceal or suppress their sorrow—to just get over it! Drawing on Philipp Nicolai's (1556–1608) “So wünsch ich nun ein gute Nacht der Welt” (I Now Wish the World Good Night), Johann Christoph writes,

“Yes,” they ask, “where is your God?  
See how he comes to you.” [Cf. Ps 42:3]  
This torments my heart, marrow, and blood,  
so that I weep from such affliction,  
especially when the lying mob  
still despises and mocks me,  
as if I were not in distress.<sup>12</sup>

He also cites a stanza from Franz Rhode's (1569–1617) “Ach Gott, wem soll ichs klagen” (O God, to Whom Shall I Lament It) to similar effect:

I am not permitted to lament my suffering,  
people ridicule me for doing so.  
I must bear it alone,  
and find rest for my heart.  
A small herb grows alone  
in my widower's garden;  
it is called patience,  
and, unfortunately, I know it all too well.<sup>13</sup>

One may see in these borrowed verses a Lutheran self-critique with respect to contemporary grieving practices. Johann Christoph had a very difficult time managing

<sup>12</sup> Rittgers, *A Widower's Lament*, 156–57.

<sup>13</sup> Rittgers, 174.

his grief in the way some in his age thought he should. It seems he was not alone in this experience and at least a few Lutheran hymn writers were concerned enough to address the growing stoicism of their day in their hymns.

The most moving entry of the *Pious Meditations* is the hymn Johann Christoph composed on what would have been his nineteenth wedding anniversary. He set it to one of Anna Maria's favorite tunes. In the hymn he has his deceased wife consoling him from heaven. The hymn begins,

AMICO, beloved darling, where have  
you gone?  
Has the beloved God taken you  
to himself?  
Or have you been completely taken away from me  
for some other reason?  
On our anniversary,  
speak or cry out,  
and help me lessen  
my heart's sorrow.<sup>14</sup>

Anna Maria replies that he must let her go, for she is now healthy and whole in the presence of the Lord. He protests that he cannot:

My darkness I will certainly still  
grieve in my heart;  
I will build a wall, as it were, against all joy  
there,  
even if it means that death awaits me  
all the sooner.

I constantly bear my sorrow  
on account of her at all times;  
I endure it the whole night until  
early morning.<sup>15</sup>

Anna Maria again urges him to entrust her to God and to love and serve their children in her stead. Johann Christoph reluctantly resolves to do so, by God's grace, and concludes his hymn,

This song I have sung  
out of fidelity and love  
on the day of our Anniversary, because AMICO  
was swallowed up by death,  
which I bewailed along with my

<sup>14</sup> Rittgers, 124.

<sup>15</sup> Rittgers, 125.

children, who have been left behind.  
To be sure, as long as I live,  
she remains constantly close to me,  
in my heart, and  
on my lips.

Johann Christoph wrote—and apparently sang—this hymn three months after Anna Maria’s death. It is entirely possible that he sang it in the presence of his children, thus welcoming them into his own sorrow and teaching them how to grieve as a Christian.

Third, Johann Christoph was a lay theologian of the cross. Scholars debate just how central the theology of the cross was to Luther’s overall Reformation agenda and just how long it persisted in his thought. One thing is clear from the *Pious Meditations*: it was still prevalent enough in third-generation Lutheranism to be imbibed by devout laypeople and employed by them when they suffered. In one entry, Johann Christoph prays to Christ, “May I also by the power of your Cross patiently overcome all of my crosses and suffering, and through crosses and death press on to you in eternal life.”<sup>16</sup> A verse he borrows from Adam Reusner’s (1496–ca. 1575) “*In dich habe ich gehofet*” (In You Have I Hoped) runs,

Delivery from worry comes, Lord,  
from depending fully  
on your goodness,  
which is truly great,  
although not always apparent,  
and frequently hidden in affliction.<sup>17</sup>

Later in the work, he prays, “Help me in all of this so that my immature faith may be able to perceive the affection of your fatherly heart, which is frequently hidden under the cross.”<sup>18</sup>

Johann Christoph had learned to see the good and merciful God hidden in suffering and to view the loss of his wife and the sorrow it had caused him as an alien work of God. His source of confidence was his faith in the divine promises of mercy in the Word, even though his own life experience powerfully tempted him to believe that God was against him. More specifically, his familiarity with the theology of the cross allowed him to see his own crosses not as a divine punishment for sin but as a fatherly chastisement and invitation to deeper faith. He writes,

Ah, LORD, give me patience, which is absolutely necessary for me, and teach me to keep still before you, my God [cf. Ps 46:10], to regard this affliction not as a sign of your disfavor but of your fatherly affection. . . . Rather, let me recognize from day to day, ever more and more, that you

<sup>16</sup> Rittgers, 86. Cf. Phil 3:14.

<sup>17</sup> Rittgers, 96.

<sup>18</sup> Rittgers, 131.



have intended all of this only for my edification, and that hitherto you have delivered me from six troubles, and that . . . you will not leave me stranded in the seventh.<sup>19</sup>

At his best, at his most Lutheran, Johann Christoph was able to find consolation in the gospel in his distress.

But Johann Christoph's faith in the goodness of the hidden God frequently wavered. He did not always experience or even confess confidence in God's mercy. There are several entries in which he pleads with God for grace and asserts that his sin is to blame for his loss. His Lutheran faith told him otherwise, that Christ had borne all punishment for sin and thus faithful Christians should not view their affliction as a *Gottesstrafe* (punishment of God); it could only be a form of discipline for the Christian's good.<sup>20</sup> But Johann Christoph found this hard to believe at times. He was crushed by grief, after all, and was grasping to understand the tragedy that had befallen him and his children. In an early entry he writes, "I must freely confess and say that God has sent all of this to me himself . . . because of my sin . . . for it is his work to punish on account of sin."<sup>21</sup>

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This explanation for misfortune—that it is the result of divine punishment for sin—was entirely plausible to Johann Christoph. It has warrant in Scripture, after all, and even though Lutheran theology sought to qualify it, early modern Lutherans continued to inhabit a guilt-culture that placed fallen human beings in the dock before the righteous and almighty Judge. By way of contrast, in the North American context, God is the one who is frequently in the dock, needing to defend himself before human judges—for we do not inhabit a guilt-culture. This important difference marks a crucial cultural divide between Johann Christoph's world and our own. To be sure, modern people can still interpret their suffering as divine punishment, but they are not led to this interpretation by the dominant culture. Lutheran pastors might wish to revive something of the early modern guilt-culture by preaching the law, but before they do so, they must appreciate that the very existence of a law-giving and righteous God has become implausible for many of their parishioners. Pre-evangelistic work is required.

<sup>19</sup> Rittgers, 130. Cf. Job 5:19.

<sup>20</sup> See Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 106–8, 134, 147–48, 173, 217, 247.

<sup>21</sup> Rittgers, *A Widower's Lament*, 69. Cf. Jer 30:15.

Fourth, Johann Christoph knew how to lament. Rather than allowing his suffering to close him in upon himself and to cut him off from God, he knew how to pour out his grieving heart to God and, at least on occasion, to protest God's treatment of him. Early in the *Pious Meditations*, he confesses in an original hymn, "Alone before you, Lord Jesus Christ, I now lament my distress. You are rich in consolation and help, let me not despair."<sup>22</sup> In other original hymns he cries out, "Jesus Christ, graciously hear my lamenting voice, listen to my plea, I ask. My strength is completely spent in this danger, have regard for my sighing."<sup>23</sup> Or again: "I can lament my misery to no one but you, my faithful God."<sup>24</sup> And finally: "Daily I make my lament, the water is almost up to my mouth, and I certainly cannot hold out if you do not help me bear my affliction."<sup>25</sup> While his laments do not frequently include protest, as one finds in some portions of the biblical lament tradition (see Pss 44, 80, and 88), occasionally Johann Christoph raises an angry fist to heaven. In one entry, quoting Psalm 13:1–2, he asks, "Why, then, O God, my God, do you so utterly forget me? How long will you hide your face? Lord, how long must I seek counsel from my own sorrowful soul? How long will suffering afflict my heart?"<sup>26</sup> In another, he interrogates God, quoting Jeremiah 14:9, "Why do you act as a hero who has lost heart and or a giant who cannot help?"<sup>27</sup>

I believe that Johann Christoph was trying, if haltingly, to recover the fullness of the biblical lament tradition, a good deal of which was suppressed among Christians in centuries preceding our own. In the *Pious Meditations*, we have a distinctively Lutheran expression of lament from the Reformation era. Along with the hymns he cites that complain of the growing stoicism of his day, Johann Christoph's *Pious Meditations* provides testimony that the biblical lament tradition was in use by at least some devout Christians in the early modern period as they contended with *Anfechtungen*.<sup>28</sup> While lament has experienced something of a revival in recent decades, many Christians still do not make use of it as they might. Johann Christoph can be a companion in the personal recovery of lament.

The *Pious Meditations* offers many additional salutary lessons—and instances of historical alterity. It is a work that demonstrates how the past can enrich the life of faith in the present; it can, perhaps, also help the church chart a faithful course for the future. ⊕

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<sup>22</sup> Rittgers, 83.

<sup>23</sup> Rittgers, 172.

<sup>24</sup> Rittgers, 177.

<sup>25</sup> Rittgers, 203.

<sup>26</sup> Rittgers, 200.

<sup>27</sup> Rittgers, 147.

<sup>28</sup> Rittgers, 27–28, 253 (see discussion and notes).