



Luther, the Bible, and Prayer

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Martin Luther saw the Bible and prayer as inextricably intertwined. He could not conceive of one without the other. Prayer was indispensable for understanding the Bible. In turn, the Bible provided reasons to pray, texts for prayer, and stories of how prayer actually functioned in the life of faith.

I. PRAYER IS NECESSARY FOR UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

In the *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition* (1539) of his writings, Luther set forth the right way to study theology (or study scripture—for Luther the same thing).¹ Citing his own experience, he laid out

¹ Abbreviations: AL *The Annotated Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015–2017); LW in *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–); WA *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 71 vols. to date (Weimar: Herman Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883–); WADB *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Deutsche Bibel*. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1906–61); BC *The Book of Concord: The*

For Luther, prayer and the Bible were intertwined, and his usage of Biblical prayers, especially the Lord's Prayer and the Psalms, were important in both his writings and in his role as a pastor.

three steps—*oratio, meditatio, tentatio* (prayer, meditation, spiritual struggle). In discussing that first step (prayer), Luther wrote that “the Holy Scriptures constitute a book that turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness, because not one teaches about eternal life except this one alone.” He then advised his readers to:

straightway despair of your reason and understanding. With them you will not attain eternal life...But kneel down in your little room and pray to God with real humility and earnestness, that he through his dear Son may give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding.²

As Timothy Wengert reminds us, “this prayer was not the pious words of a holy person seeking richer understanding or deeper insight but rather the desperation of someone confronted by the text’s very foolishness and counterrational statements.”³ Though Luther upheld the importance of study in the biblical languages and humanistic methods for understanding texts, he nevertheless did not give intellectual capacities and skills primacy in understanding scripture. Luther reminded his readers of the need for divine instruction even when (or perhaps especially when) one considers one’s self well prepared for study. He described:

how David keeps praying in the above-mentioned psalm [119], “Teach me, Lord, instruct me, lead me, show me, and many more words like these. Although he well knew and daily heard and read the text of Moses and other books besides, still he wants to lay hold of the real teacher of the Scriptures himself, so that he may not seize upon them pell-mell with his reason and become his own teacher. For such practice gives rise to factious spirits who allow themselves to nurture the delusion that the Scriptures are subject to them and can be easily grasped with their reason...⁴

Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

² AL 4:482; LW 34:285–286; WA 50:659.

³ Timothy Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther: An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 124.

⁴ AL 4:482–484; LW 34:286; WA 50:659.

Luther made clear that observing the three rules—*oratio, meditatio, tentatio*—was essential to becoming a good theologian and pastor. As a result:

You will not only despise the books written by adversaries, but the longer you write and teach the less you will be pleased with yourself. When you have reached this point, then do not be afraid to hope that you have begun to become a real theologian, who can teach not only the young and imperfect Christians, but also the maturing and perfect ones. For indeed, Christ's church has all kinds of Christians in it who are young, old, weak, sick, healthy, strong, energetic, lazy, simple, wise, etc.⁵

Robert Kolb provides a useful reminder that *oratio, meditatio, tentatio* do not constitute a linear progression:

Prayer, meditation, and spiritual struggle did not for Luther denote three chronological stages of engaging Scripture; the three happen simultaneously, he believed. Luther's calling prayer a "sufficient" exercise of faith indicates how vital it is for Luther that the conversation that God initiates, from the very nature of conversation, embraces human response in prayer. The text must be massaged, by reading aloud and by letting the mind explore its possibilities. This mind had to submit to the text...All such exercise takes place always amid the daily life that is the stage for the eschatological struggle with Satan and his many minions.⁶

II. THE BIBLE PROCLAIMS GOD'S COMMAND TO PRAY AND PROMISE TO HEAR PRAYER

In the Bible Luther saw and heard stories of human need that drove those affected to pray. He also saw and heard God's command

⁵ AL 4:482; LW 34:287; WA 50:659.

⁶ Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 129.

to pray and promise to hear. Luther understood the second commandment “You are not to misuse the name of your God” not simply as a prohibition but as a positive command to use God’s name “in every time of need to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God.”⁷ God’s command to pray was paired with God’s promise to hear prayer, a promise that Luther emphasized over and over.

Thus God declares in Matthew 21 [:22] and in Mark 11 [:24], “Therefore I tell you, whatsoever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you certainly will.” And in Luke 11 [:9–13] he says, “And I tell you, ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”⁸

Luther saw God’s command to pray and promise to hear prayer throughout scripture. The command and promise showed a God who wanted to hear from humans and was deeply concerned about their needs. God’s command and promise were the basis for prayer and the reason that Luther rejected other ideas concerning prayer. He rejected the notion that that God was more likely to hear a prayer spoken by a worthy human. He lifted up Bible stories of God hearing all sorts of unworthy humans (Jonah, David, for example). God’s promise to hear prayer never depended on human worthiness or actions. Luther also rejected the practice of prayer to dead saints because (a) God had commanded humans to pray to God, and (b) he could find nowhere in scripture where dead saints promised to hear prayer. Prayer was to be directed to God alone.

III. THE BIBLE PROVIDES TEXTS FOR PRAYER

For Luther and the Wittenberg reformation the Bible provided texts for prayer and criteria for prayer content. The Lord’s Prayer was the model prayer, the prayer that was the measure of all other prayers. The Bible also provided many other prayers which, Luther’s pastoral sensitivity knew, could be useful as people need different forms and texts on different occasions.

⁷ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* in *BC*, 352.

⁸ AL 4:152; *LW* 42:87–88; WA 2:175–176.

The Lord's Prayer

Luther expressed his high opinion of the Lord's Prayer repeatedly and saw it as a model for and measure of prayer. In *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519) he wrote:

Since our Lord is the author of this prayer, it is without a doubt the most sublime, the loftiest, and the most excellent. If he, the good and faithful Teacher, had known a better one, he would surely have taught us that too.⁹

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In his *Large Catechism* (1529) he commented: "...there is no nobler prayer to be found on earth, for it has the powerful testimony that God loves to hear it."¹⁰ For Luther, authentic communication, honest prayer, does not mean that humans have to be extemporaneous. They can use the words Christ provided. Luther advocated the use of the Lord's Prayer in communal, household, and personal settings. Luther included the Lord's Prayer in his revision of the Latin Mass (1523).¹¹ In his German Mass (1526) he placed a public paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer after the sermon.¹² His *Small Catechism* included not only explanations of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer but also made it part of household practice in "How the head of the house is to teach the members of the household to say morning and evening blessings."¹³ Luther gave extensive instruction to his barber in *A Simple Way to Pray: How One should Pray, for Peter, the Master*

⁹ *LW* 42:21; *WA* 2:82, 23–26.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *Large Catechism* in *BC*, 443.

¹¹ *LW* 53:28; *WA* 12:212–213.

¹² *AL* 3:153–155; *LW* 53:78–79; *WA* 19:95–96.

¹³ *BC*, 356–358, 363–364.

Barber (1535) on how to use the Lord's Prayer in his personal prayer practice.¹⁴

A focus on the Lord's Prayer as the primary and paradigmatic prayer became typical of Luther's movement. This contrasted with existing prayer practice. Medieval prayer books typically included many prayers, such as the Hail Mary and adaptations of monastic prayers. Further, Luther and his followers emphasized understanding the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, not simply repeating them mindlessly. In his *Small Catechism* he provided concise, easily learned explanations for each petition.

In 1535 Luther wrote movingly of his own use of the Lord's Prayer but also criticized its misuse:

To this day I suckle at the Lord's Prayer like a child, and as an old man eat and drink from it and never get my fill. It is the very best prayer, even better than the psalter, which is so very dear to me. It is surely evident that a real master composed and taught it. What a great shame that the prayer of such a master is prattled and chattered so irreverently all over the world! How many pray the Lord's Prayer several thousand times in the course of a year, and if they were to keep on doing so for a thousand years they would not have tasted nor prayed one iota, one dot, of it! In a word, the Lord's Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth (along with the name and word of God). Everybody tortures and abuses it; few take comfort and joy in its proper use.¹⁵

Luther saw the Lord's Prayer not as something to be repeated mindlessly but as a key expression of the human side of the conversation with God. It provided words for that conversation and implicitly taught that God is a God of conversation. Luther's *Small Catechism* begins with God's commands (The Ten Commandments) and promises (The Apostles' Creed). The Lord's Prayer, human address to God comes in response to these commands and promises. This prayer is, as Luther says in the *Large Catechism*, prayer for "faith and the fulfillment of the 10 commandments."¹⁶ In other words, the one praying asks

¹⁴ AL 4:253–281; LW 43:193–211; WA 38:358–375.

¹⁵ AL 4:266–267; LW 43:200; WA 38:364.

¹⁶ BC, 441.

in this prayer that all those matters described in the commandments and the creed might be true for him, that God might continue and complete his work in him.

The Psalms

Luther and his followers persistently encouraged the use of the psalms as prayers. The psalms contained words that expressed human needs in powerful and memorable ways. They exemplified the bold, faithful prayer that Luther thought essential.¹⁷ Luther included references to eight psalms in his 1522 *Little Prayer Book*, Psalms 12, 67, 51, 103, 20, 79, 25, and 10. He stated for what purposes each should be prayed. For example, Psalm 12 was to be prayed “For the exaltation of the Holy Gospel” Psalm 67 “To be prayed for the Increase of faith,” and Psalm 20 “For good government and for earthly authorities.”¹⁸ These designations indicate that Luther expected and encouraged a basic understanding of each psalm rather than its mere recitation.

Luther opined that everything a “devout heart” could wish for in prayer could be found in the psalms, with words much better than any humans could invent.

In his *Preface to Cruciger’s Summer Postil* (1544) Luther called the Psalter “the finest and most precious prayer book and hymnal of all.”¹⁹ In a preface to the Neuburger Psalter (1545) he urged every Christian who wanted to pray to let the Psalter be his daily prayerbook. He also thought it would be good for Christians to be so practiced in using the psalms that they memorize them word for word, so that, whatever the occasion, they can draw sayings from them. Luther opined that everything a “devout heart” could wish for in prayer could be found in the psalms, with words much better than any humans could invent.²⁰

¹⁷ I have discussed this at length in an earlier *Word & World* article, “Martin Luther on Praying the Psalms,” *Word & World* 43 no. 4 (2023).

¹⁸ AL 4:194; LW 43:41; WA 10/2:410–425.

¹⁹ LW 77:9; WA 21:201.

²⁰ WA DB 10/2:155.

Other Biblical Prayers

Luther thought biblical models important for prayer and encouraged their use. Just as biblical stories tell of God's work among humans and the human response, so the words of biblical prayers describe real human need and God's response. As scripture bears Christ to us, so also biblical prayers bear our needs to Christ.

Luther, in his lectures on 1 John (1527) commented at length on I John 5:14–15 (“And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.” NRSV) This promise encouraged prayer, taught the nature of the God who hears prayer, and provided insight on proper prayer practices. Luther used a string of biblical examples to teach the form and content of prayer and remind his listeners that God does indeed answer. He cited David and Jeremiah, saying that “... he who desires to pray properly should... say brief prayers, as David and Jeremiah did, yet in such a way that he is persuaded that he will be heard.” Luther used the story of Solomon as an example of proper content for prayer. Solomon (1 Kings 3:5–11) asked for an understanding heart. Luther noted “This prayer pleased God.” Because Solomon had prayed according to the will of God, God gave him what he had asked. But Luther hastened to tell his listeners “It is not seemly to fix the manner and the time.”²¹

In a variety of contexts Luther suggested biblical prayers. In his treatise *On War Against the Turk* (1529), Luther saw repentance and prayer as necessary weapons against the Turkish Muslims. He provided specific examples of appropriate scriptural prayers.

In exhorting to prayer we must also include words and examples from the Scriptures that show how strong and mighty a person's prayer has sometimes been; for example, Elijah's prayer, which St. James praises [Jas. 5:17]; the prayers of Elisha and other prophets; of kings David, Solomon, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jesias, Hezekiah, etc.; the story of how God promised Abraham that he would spare the land of Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of five righteous

²¹ LW 30:322–323; WA 20:791–793.

men. For the prayer of a righteous person can do much if it is persistent, St. James say in his epistle [Jas. 5:16].²²

IV. THE BIBLE PROVIDES ACCOUNTS OF HOW PRAYER FUNCTIONS IN LIFE

The stories of scripture again and again showed people praying in the midst of spiritual and bodily need. Abraham confronting childlessness, Lot fleeing Sodom, Moses on the brink of the promised land, Jonah in the belly of the fish, and Jesus in Gethsemane were all examples of people who cried out to God in bold and blunt ways. Luther's lectures often commented on these prayers and God's response.

The Bible shows a God who listens compassionately to blunt human grumbling. In Genesis 15, God came to Abram in a vision and declared "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." Abram responded with a complaint "I continue childless" and observed "a slave born in my house will be my heir." God's repeated the promise "...your own son shall be your heir." Then God brought Abram outside and said "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then God promised, "So shall your descendants be." Abram "believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." Luther noted that Abram "began to have doubts as to the protection and the kindness of God." Several times Luther described Abram as doubting the fulfillment of God's promise. He laments his childlessness with "words of profound grief and sorrow." Luther described him as pouring out "his complaint and the thoughts of a very troubled heart. Luther did not criticize him for his despair or his doubt, nor did he criticize him for taking his complaint to God, rather Luther found this good and proper. In such trials we should "commend our cause to the Lord." Luther was confident that "Eventually He comes and encourages the humble."²³

The Bible shows a God who was willing to change his intentions in response to human pleas. Luther commented in his Genesis lectures on the story (Genesis 18) of Abraham bargaining with God on behalf

²² AL 5:356; LW 46:173–174, WA 30/2:119–120,

²³ LW 3:12–17; WA 42:557–560.

of Sodom.²⁴ One of the Luther's most interesting discussions on prayer is found in his comments on the story of Lot fleeing Sodom. Genesis 19 describes the angels seizing Lot and his family, taking them out of the city, and commanding them "Flee for your life... flee to the hills, lest you be consumed." Lot however does not like his destination and pleads not to be sent to the hills but rather to a nearby city. "Let me escape there!" Lot's request is granted. For Luther, this story showed that God wants to be asked and wants to respond to those asking. Luther described prayer as "highly necessary" and urged his listeners not to "be deceived by this evil temptation that we think that even without our prayer God will give us what we need, and that since He knows what benefits us most, there is no need of prayer." Luther gave several examples from scripture to show that "God allows Himself to be prevailed upon and subordinates His will to ours." This led Luther to question why we neglect to pray. "Why are we without faith to such an extent and so fainthearted, as though our prayer amounted to nothing?" He noted "we have been taught not only by the promises but also by the examples—that God wants to disregard His own will and do ours." For Luther the story was concrete encouragement to pray: "Thus this account rouses and spurs us on to prayer in all our dangers, since God wants to do what we want, provided that we humbly prostrate ourselves before Him and pray."²⁵

The Bible also shows a God who, even when not granting a request, still is faithful and caring.

The Bible also shows a God who, even when not granting a request, still is faithful and caring. In his lectures on Deuteronomy, Luther used the story of Moses to teach about prayer that is, seemingly, not heard or not answered. Deuteronomy 3:24–25 records Moses's request to the Lord when his people were at the brink of entering the Promised Land. Moses wanted to cross the Jordan and see the land. Moses's request was not granted. God told him to go to the top of Pisgah and look over the Jordan but also said "you shall not cross

²⁴ LW 3:234; WA 43:43.

²⁵ LW 3:289–290; WA 43:82.

over this Jordan.” Finally, God told him to encourage and strengthen Joshua. Luther asked “why is the prayer of Moses not heard, since it is likely that he prayed in the Spirit?” and responded

This is written for our example and consolation. For even though the Lord does not hear him and this causes Moses to realize that He is angry with him, as he says here, nevertheless He does not desert him; He commands him to climb the mountain and view the land, and to give orders to Joshua.

Luther draws a conclusion: “. . .let us in no wise doubt that we are favored by, and dear to God; and let us grasp at the favor beneath the wrath, lest we lose heart.”²⁶ Moses’s request is not granted. Yet Luther saw that beneath God’s wrath toward Moses lies favor. In the midst of God’s rejection of our requests, we are to have confidence that we are favored by God and dear to God. Grasping at the favor beneath the wrath will cause us not to lose heart.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

For Martin Luther the Bible and prayer were inextricably intertwined. The Bible taught prayer, repeatedly announcing God’s command to pray and promise to hear. It provided the prayer that Jesus taught as the primary prayer as well as a plethora of other prayer models and texts. It taught, through its stories of faith, the nature of prayer and the nature of the God who heard and responded to prayer. In turn, prayer was necessary for properly studying and understanding the Bible. ⊕

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²⁶ LW 9:42; WA 14:578–579.