

SPES INVICTA FACIT THEOLOGUM: THE VIRTUE OF HOPE IN THE FORGE OF THE THEOLOGIANS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther is known more for his evangelical emphasis on the gift of faith than for his mystical teaching on the virtue of hope, and rightly so. As Irenaeus is the holy church's *doctor Incarnationis*, Athanasius of the Trinity, Ambrose of the mysteries, Augustine of predestination and grace and love and the two cities and the saint's battle against his flesh, Cyril of the real union of the two natures in Christ, Maximus of the integrity of each in its distinction from the other, Thomas of creation and virtue, Calvin of mother Church, Owen of mystical union, Kierkegaard of the self at peace with itself because it rests transparently in God, Dostoevsky of sin, Chesterton of magnanimous mirth not only in man but in God, Bonhoeffer of life-together-in-discipleship no matter the cost, von Balthasar of beauty, and John Paul the Great of human persons embodied as male-and-female; so Luther is our *doctor iustificationis*, our greatest teacher (after St. Paul and John) of justification by faith alone.

Of course, the faith that justifies because it apprehends Christ is not an active but a passive virtue. The whole point of *this* gift—which the Spirit gives where and when he wishes through preaching and sacrament—is to enable an otherwise spiritually-incapacitated child of Adam to receive The Gift That Surpasses All Others: “For God so loved that world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). A strange virtue, that, which does nothing, receives everything, and makes condemned men sing and dance for joy like the children free grace has made them. You can almost see poor Aristotle shaking his head, Pelagius smirking, John Eck enraged, and Stanley Hauerwas telling you to get serious and read MacIntyre. But even if 10,000 aristocrats of the Spirit (with Tom Wright himself at their head) come to us preaching another gospel, we poor sinners will remember the apostolic anathema, sing a verse or two of “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less,” and go on dancing for joy.

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But believe it or not, Luther was quite versatile as a teacher of Christian doctrine, and as exegete, and as *Seelsorger*. The Lord gave him a deep, commanding grasp of the orthodox faith. He knew the Scriptures inside and out. And he had his scars. He knew a thing or two about life in the warzone “between God and the devil” (as Heiko Oberman subtitled his biography);² like holy Jacob, brother Martin had striven with God and men and demons, and prevailed. Occasional exaggerations about the Pope aside (who after all had a death-warrant on Luther’s head) and inexcusable grumpy-old-man-rants against the Jews justly condemned (and Luther was neither the first nor the last anti-Semite in our family history, alas), if you work through the works of Luther’s last decade in particular you will find a “treasure trove” of insightful exegesis, dogmatic theology, spiritual teaching, and practical wisdom.³

When Julius Köstlin made that claim in the nineteenth century, he had the sprawling *Lectures on Genesis* (eight volumes in English translation) especially in mind. The lectures are Luther’s last great work: he was 51 when he began at Gen 1 in June 1535—already an old man by the standards of the day—62 and months from death when he nearly finished Gen 50 in November 1545. It was a massive investment of time and energy, clearly, and, one supposes, an intentionally-chosen teaching focus for the last leg of his pilgrimage. What did Luther think he was doing in these “lectures”?

John Maxfield argues for an ecclesial goal.⁴ Most of his students were training to serve as pastors in the evangelical Church, and Luther invested the last decade of his life preparing them for faithful/courageous Word-and-sacrament ministry. That is right, I think, but not quite complete. For at the heart of Luther’s vision for pastoral ministry was the last thing you might expect: holiness. A pastor worth his salt has to know God as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob knew him. He must be on *intimate terms* with El Shaddai, who for reasons known to him alone delighted in these ancient Bedouins and sent his Son to carry on famously with them, sit at table with them, and on occasion—for their own great good—enter into situations of (shall we say) “*competitive agency*” with them. He brought them to the brink, led them to the end of themselves, sent them to Sheol—not to destroy them

² Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

³ With this caveat, I hereby correct an academic sin of omission in the third part of *Renovatio: Martin Luther’s Augustinian Theology of Sin, Grace & Holiness* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019). There, I made the case that the old Doctor is more useful than the young Reformer as a teacher of Christian doctrine. I stand by that judgment—*but!* But. That having been said, may I commend the example of Shem and Japheth as a methodological principle for our approach to the sometimes-massive failures of our fathers in the faith? Luther was not holier than Noah, a godly man who—having built an ark for the salvation of his household, condemned the world, and become an heir of the righteousness of faith—got rip-roaring drunk and lay exposed in his tent; but then again, neither are we. Have a care, my friend, before you rush to expose the nakedness of your fathers.

⁴ John A. Maxfield, *Luther’s Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008), 15–18.

but to raise them up and welcome them into the most intimate communion with himself, by his Spirit, through his Son.

That is how you make a theologian: “It’s by living, no, it’s by suffering, dying, and being damned, not by reading, thinking, and speculating, that you become a theologian.” So Luther on the Psalms circa 1519, a youngish professor but growing up fast, one year from his excommunication by Leo X. For these are the conditions of the possibility of the genesis of hope: and it is hope alone, unconquered and unconquerable hope, that makes a theologian.⁵

So we can see Maxwell’s theory, and raise him one. Luther’s theo-spiritual *paideia* is on full display in the Genesis lectures. In particular, his interpretation of the deeds and sufferings of Noah, Abraham, and Jacob are all worth careful study in this regard. But here our task is to harvest old Dr. Luther’s insights into how God worked *mirabiliter per contraria* to transform Joseph the patriarch from a fundamentally just if naïve young man into a true theologian. The lectures on the life of Joseph (Gen 37, 39–50) date from the last years of Luther’s life (1544–45) and as such show us the considered judgments of a battle-tested, world-weary man. They are worth listening to, not as straight exegesis so much as mystagogy into the art of theology and a theological life.

II. ORATIO, MEDITATIO, TENTATIO,

We turn first to the methodological “preface” Luther wrote in 1539 for the first volume of his collected German works, since it lays out the premises of his spiritual theology in lapidary form and so serves as a hermeneutical shortcut into the lengthy lectures on Joseph.

⁵ I am playing with—but also interpreting—a well-known saying of Luther’s at table circa 1531: *Sola experientia facit theologum*. Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 1:16.13, hereafter WA; Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 54.7. Hereafter LW. Back in 1516, young Dr. Luder had categorized theology (with the Franciscans and Augustinians before him, the Puritans after, and right down to Dr. Vanhoozer) as a practical rather than theoretical *scientia*. To describe it, he coined an unusual phrase: *sapientia experimentalis*. Mark well, this little gem is found in a marginal note on the sermons of Johannes Tauler (WA 9.98.21), a Dominican mystical theologian of the fourteenth century with whom Martin was deeply engaged at this time. In 1544, some thirty years later, Luther was still quoting Tauler with (critical) approval: “Our afflictions are the surest argument and pledge that we are sons of God. There is a saying of Tauler’s, though he does not speak in the terms of Holy Scripture, but uses an alien and foreign way of speaking: ‘A man should know that he has done great damage if he does not await the work of the Lord,’ viz., when God wants to crucify him, mortify and reduce the old man to nothing, which doesn’t happen except by suffering and cross. There indeed you support the work of the Lord, who forms you, planes you, and cuts off the rough branches; and whatever there may be that hinders eternal edification he cuts off with ax, saw, mattock. Just as David says in Ps 37: ‘Submit to God, and be formed by him’” (WA 44.397.12–20, cf. LW 7.133; the Psalm reference is less a quote of Ps 37 than a summary of its content).

In a whimsical yet deadly serious paragraph, Luther diagnoses the disease that infects the theologian:

If you feel and are inclined to think you have made it, flattering yourself with your own little books, teaching, or writing, because you have done it beautifully and preached excellently; if you are highly pleased when someone praises you in the presence of others; if you perhaps look for praise, and would sulk or quit what you are doing if you did not get it—if you are of that stripe, dear friend, then take yourself by the ears, and if you do this in the right way you will find a beautiful pair of big, long, shaggy donkey ears. Then do not spare any expense! Decorate them with golden bells, so that people will be able to hear you wherever you go, point their fingers at you, and say, “See, see! There goes that clever beast, who can write such exquisite books and preach so remarkably well.” That very moment you will be blessed and blessed beyond measure in the kingdom of heaven. Yes, in that heaven where hellfire is ready for the devil and his angels. To sum up: let us be proud and seek honor in the places where we can. But in this book, the honor is God’s alone, as it is said, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5); to whom be glory, world without end. Amen.⁶

Pride, vanity, longing for the praise of men, for recognition, for status: these vices spell the end of true theology before we even get started. What can be done to counteract them?

A. ORATIO

St. David, *the* prophet in Luther’s estimation, shows the way in Ps 119. Real theology begins with prayer (*oratio*). Since the Bible exposes the folly of *adam’s* wisdom—“Not one book teaches about eternal life except this one alone!”—you have to despair of your own reason and wit. Otherwise, “your presumptuousness will plunge you and others with you out of heaven (as happened to Lucifer) into the abyss of hell.” Satan, not Kant, was the first massive mind that tried to put religion inside the bounds of reason alone. It did not work out so well for him. But until the miracle of grace begins to pull you out of Adam’s darkness into the light of Christ, there is not much of an alternative. What then can the would-be theologian do to be saved? “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.” After all, that is what David did. He had read Moses and many other books besides, yet

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

⁶ WA 50.660–61; LW 34.287f.

the Scriptures are subject to them and can be easily grasped by their reason.⁷

Who is the better exegetical aid: your library of commentaries, your brilliant mind, or the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, bears witness to the Son, and speaks through the prophets? If this is not mere rhetoric, then the conclusion to draw from the davidic theologian's practical syllogism is—to pray. Without ceasing, to pray: as I believe Karl Barth once said, when he too had grown old, in his little book about *Evangelical Theology*.⁸

B. MEDITATIO

But if study without prayer is blind, prayer without study is empty. The second rule for theological reality is *meditatio*. Not “meditation” as you think of it in its Platonic or Zen-Buddhist varieties, but pretty much just prayerfully reading your Bible. A lot.

Secondly, you should meditate, that is: not only in the heart, but rather also outwardly (*eusserlich*) ever pressing and rubbing (*treiben und reiben*) the oral speech and literal word in the book (*mündliche rede und buchstabische wort im Buch*), reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard, and spoken them once or twice, and that you have complete understanding. You will never be a particularly good theologian if you do that.⁹

Luther is deeply impressed by the way David speaks once and again of God's law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, word, and promise: “He will talk, meditate, speak, sing, hear, read, by day and night and always, about nothing except God's Word and commandments.”¹⁰ A good theologian does the same, not merely because he is in love with the Bible (though there is that) but because he knows the Bible is the greatest means of grace our good God has given his people.

Tragic detours start the moment when, for whatever reason, we stop thinking/feeling/living this fundamental theo-spiritual reality: that the Word is *enough*. “If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32). Nah, thinks self: there must be more than this. Behold the origins-story of every gnostic of whatever shape or size: “Did God *really* say? You will not ‘surely die’! *You will be enlightened. You will be like God . . .*” Try to transcend the Word, to get above, around, behind, beneath it, and you will fall to your

⁷ WA 50.659; LW 34.285f.

⁸ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (London: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1963; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

⁹ WA 50.659.22–28; cf. LW 34.286.

¹⁰ WA 50.659; LW 34.286.

death like Eve, Cerinthus, and any number of popular teachers today. You may make the bestsellers list. You may be highly “spiritual.” But it will be by association with that preening spirit who despises the Word-made-flesh-of-Mary, hates the Jews and their scrolls, and tricks the impressionable into preferring a genius to the apostles.

No, to be spiritual is to grab hold of the letter of the Bible and never let it go, to make your home inside these holy words and to hide these holy words inside your heart: “for God will not give you his Spirit without the external Word (*eusserlich wort*).”¹¹ The Bible! Make no mistake: the Spirit speaks *here*, in the book that bears witness to the Word made flesh, the book of God.

C. TENTATIO

Last but not least, the third rule is this: you will not become a true theologian until you suffer. *Tentatio. Anfechtung*: the Latin (“temptation”) is easier to translate than the German, which epitomizes the core experiential reality of those disciples who dare to stick out their necks as servants of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. Plotinus said you cannot really define beauty, but if you have seen it you will understand what he is trying to talk about. Same with *Anfechtung*. It is ineffable in its awfulness, and if you have yet to suffer it you will make neither head nor tail of this paper. But if you have passed through the fire and the water, well, you know.

My heart is in anguish within me!
 The terrors of death have fallen upon me.
 Fear and trembling come upon me,
 and horror overwhelms me. (Ps 55:4–5)

Someone forgot to tell Krister Stendhal about the Psalter, apparently; the brooding, introspective conscience of the West in fact began in the East long centuries before Augustine supposedly invented the self. An extraordinarily beautiful spiritual creature invented the self, when he reckoned it better to reign in his hell than to serve in God’s heaven; and as Adam-king stood by and did nothing, the sword of Gen 2:16–17 hanging useless in its sheath, this wicked spirit deceived mother Eve by promising her she could become her own true self, too. The demonic poison drunk and swallowed, the first-formed suffered *Anfechtung*. They tried (in vain, of course) to cloak their shame with fig leaves and hid from the presence of the very God who—before the pyrrhic triumph of the self—had been the delight of their unfallen hearts.

And so it has been ever since. *Anfechtung* is the inheritance of all Adam’s daughters and sons; and as Kierkegaard explains so well in *Sickness unto Death*, if you think you are the exception, it proves you are in despair too. Cain suffered it after he killed his brother; his punishment was more than he could bear. Noah surely suffered it, surrounded by floodwaters on every side, the earth’s peoples drowned in judgment. Our father Abram suffered it

¹¹ WA 50.659.32f; cf. LW 34.286.

the night the Word came in a vision to speak with him: “Behold, a dreadful and great darkness fell upon him” (Gen 15:12); and it took four millennia before our dear depressed Dane was able to articulate Abraham’s anguish on Moriah. (And what shafts of terror pierced Isaac’s heart, as he lay bound on the altar and watched his father raise the knife?) Rebekah suffered it when she could not conceive the promised messianic seed, then again when Esau and Jacob fought in her womb. So did Leah when she realized Jacob did not care about her at all (Gen 29:32). So did Rachel, when she watched Leah’s stock rise boy-by-baby-boy, while hers precipitously fell. St. Cheater suffered it at the Jabbok, when the Word-who-would-become-flesh wrestled him all through the night—he refused to let go till the *logos asarkos* blessed him!—after which he limped along for the rest of his pilgrim days. Moses hid his face when the fire burned in the bush, and the bush was not consumed: “for he was afraid to look at God.”¹² Holy Hannah suffered it, not that Eli understood. David complains about his *Anfechtung* in two out of every three of his songs; the sons of Korah, in Pss 42–43; Asaph, with first unnerving and then consoling frankness, in Ps 73; Heman, in the incomparable Ps 88, a most sacred psalm. And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Jonah and Jeremiah, Isaiah and Hezekiah, Simeon Peter and Saul of Tarsus and St. Paul, Augustine and Mechthild and Tauler and John Crucis and John Owen and poor William Cowper.

And yet, not one of the saints can hold a candle to the Holy One himself, in his agony in the garden and his reproach before his people and his abandonment on the tree. For us and for our salvation, Messiah went lower into the pit of death and hell than you and I will ever go, or ever have to go. For us and for our salvation, he drank the foaming cup of the fierce wrath of God the Almighty all the way down to the dregs.

Jesus began to be greatly distressed and troubled. He said to them: “My soul is very sorrowful, even unto death . . .” And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said: “Abba, Father! All things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36)

And being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:44)

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice: “Eloi! Eloi! Lema sabachthani?” Which

¹² Exod 3:6: a cameo of the *verbum incarnandum* and a striking prophecy of the complete penetration of the Lord’s humanity by the fire of his divinity in the real union of the two natures—yet without his humanity being consumed, merely purified by the all-consuming fire. See Severus of Antioch, *Homily* 14.13.

means: “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:33–34)

There you have the Man who drained the cup for us; he is the Son of God, his only Son, the Beloved.

When this tortured God gives one of his dear ones but a sip of this bitter wine, it is all you can do to keep from drowning as wave upon dark, fearsome wave crashes down upon your head. Just read Ps 88; or maybe, look back in your journals and find the 88’s you have written yourself. I know a man in Christ who eighteen years ago was thrust down into the third hell at least; and not for the last time, either. Perhaps you, gentle reader, have spent a season in this strangely christological place too?

If so, you know that what threatens to be your undoing proves to be your remaking; this is how you become a man of God. “Do your best to present yourself to God *as one approved after testing*, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). It is your making as a theologian, worth far more than your DPhil, Dr. Habil., first five book deals put together, pearl of great price, your sanity, even (if the Truth is to be trusted) your soul. “If anyone would come after Me . . .” Always, the path up is the path down, that holy, wretched downward mobility in Jesus that is the way of the Cross; and in the words of one of the better collects, may you, my friend, find this way to be “the way of life and peace.” For when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, parading about Wheaton or Cambridge or Duke with those magnificent donkey-ears of yours. Not anymore. Now that suffering has made you old, you have no choice but to stretch out your hands as Another dresses you (a small but sturdy olive-skinned Man, with dark curly hair, fire in his eyes, mirth in his smile, and scars on every inch of his body) and carries you where you would never have chosen to go.

No. 21. A theologian of glory (*Theologus gloriae*) calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross (*Theologus crucis*) calls the thing what it is. This is clear: he who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in sufferings. Therefore he prefers works to sufferings and glory to cross, power to weakness, wisdom to foolishness, and in general good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls “enemies of the cross of Christ” (*Inimicos crucis Christi*) [Phil 3.18]. Indeed: for they hate cross and sufferings, but love works and their glory. And so, the good of the cross they call evil and the evil of a work they call good. And that God is not found except in sufferings and cross, has already been said. Therefore friends of the cross (*amici crucis*) say that cross is good and works are evil, because through the cross works are destroyed and Adam is crucified, who through works is rather built up. For it’s impossible that a man not be puffed up by his good works, if he hasn’t first been emptied (*exinanitus*) and destroyed by sufferings

and evils, until he knows himself to be nothing and the works to be not his but God's.¹³

That is from the celebrated *Heidelberg Disputation*, which good Father Staupitz arranged in April 1518 as an opportunity for Luther to articulate and defend his Augustinian theology before it was too late. Oswald Bayer, the doyen of German Luther studies, thinks Luther left this severe ("Catholic") *Kreuzmystik* in the rearview mirror when he discovered his evangelical theology of the promise later that spring; but Bayer is clearly wrong. Here is Luther in the fall of 1539 laying down a spiritual method for theology that culminates in exactly the same excruciating point, to wit: the theologian's experiential participation in the affliction, suffering, and death of God's Son. In *Of the Councils and Churches* (also 1539) Luther caps his discussion of the seven sacramental "marks" of an orthodox church with *die heilige Kreuz, Nachfolge*, martyrdom, the experiential theology/spirituality/mysticism of the holy Cross.¹⁴ The Genesis lectures, the culmination of his career as a teacher of Holy Scripture—and not least the penetrating analyses of the death, descent into hell, and resurrection of St. Joseph—sing the same song.

Old married-with-kids, rogue priest, fat doctor that he was, on this point at least the "fully Reformational" Luther had not budged a bit: in the making of a theologian in the forge of *Anfechtung* there are no shortcuts, no evasions, no St.-Peter-style refusals of the Cross.

For as soon as God's Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real Doctor of you, and by his *anfechtunge* will teach you to seek and love God's Word. For I myself (that's if I, mousepoop, may even myself be mixed with the pepper) have very much my papists to thank, that through the devil's raging they have so beaten, oppressed, and distressed me, that is, they have made a pretty good theologian, which I'd hardly have become otherwise.¹⁵

These, then, are David's/Luther's methodological rules: *oratio, meditatio, Anfechtung*. Follow them, and you will find that even the best books of the fathers begin to taste stale. Not only that: the longer you keep at them,

¹³ WA 1.362.20–33; cf. LW 31.53.

¹⁴ "Seventh, one knows the holy Christian people outwardly by the holy relic of the holy Cross (*dem heilthum des heiligen Kreuzes*), that it must suffer all misfortune and persecution, all manner of *anfechtung* and evil (as the Our Father prays) from the devil, world, and flesh, inwardly sadness, timidity, fear, outwardly poverty, contempt, sickness, being weak, so that it becomes like its head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they hold fast to Christ and God's Word, and therefore suffer for Christ's sake . . . When someone condemns you for Christ's sake, curses, reviles, slanders, plagues you, that makes you holy (*das macht dich heilig*), since that kills the old Adam, since he must learn patience, humility, meekness, praise and thanks, and to be cheerful in suffering. That means then by the Holy Spirit to become holy and renewed into new life in Christ (*durch den Heiligen Geist geheiligt und erneuet zum neuen leben in Christo*), and so a man learns to believe God, to trust, to hope, to love, as Rom 5 says: "Tribulatio spem & c." WA 50.641.35–642.6, 642.27–32, cf. LW 41.164–5.

¹⁵ WA 50.660.8–14; cf. LW 34.287.

the more you teach and preach and lecture and write, the less you will be pleased with your own theological self. The Word of God will be everything to you, then; Christ will be all, your life will be one long invocation of the Spirit in the same direction, and the glory will be Father's alone. "When you have come this far, then you can hope that you have begun to become a real theologian."¹⁶

III. DIV-SCHOOL YEARS: JOSEPH'S FORMATION IN SHEOL-SCHUL

The "history of the most holy Patriarch Joseph"¹⁷ takes up the last hundred pages of volume 6 and the whole of volumes 7–8 in Luther's Works—a whopping 600 pages in the *Weimar Ausgabe*. Obviously, I cannot do justice to these lectures in this paper; but we will hit some highlights.

Now, at the start it is imperative that you suspend your critical faculties just a little. Luther stood in the great tradition of OT exegesis that began with a wonderworking rabbi from Nazareth, was advanced by his apostles, continued more or less without interruption through the patristic, medieval, and Reformation eras, and continues still to this day in, for example, women's Bible studies, books by Peter Leithart and Nancy Guthrie, the pulpits of good churches, and the like. His was an uninhibited, midrashic, spiritual/theological, believing, God-is-actually-real, and above all confidently christological approach to interpreting the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalter. The first book of Moses, *der liebe Genesis*, was Luther's favorite; and "just as there is nothing more beautiful in Holy Scripture than Genesis as a whole, so also this example [viz. Joseph's] is outstanding and memorable among the rest of the patriarchs and plainly of such a kind that I am not able to do it justice in words and thoughts."¹⁸

You know the story, so I will not rehearse its details here. For Luther, following Stephen in the great sermon that led to his death (Acts 7, especially vv. 9ff), the narrative-arc of Joseph's life is plainly christological. Despite his status as a chosen son—or rather, precisely because of it—our hero is envied, conspired against, and in effect killed by his brothers; he then descends into hell in Egypt, suffering fearsome injustices; after which he is raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the king. But the whole drama of his long-sufferings is a story of salvation: because this grain of wheat fell into the earth and died, when he rose again he was able to provide the entire famine-stricken *oikumene* with food. To top it all off, when given the chance he does not destroy his brothers but forgives them. Point by point, it is as if the Joseph-story were written to foreshadow the passion and triumph of the Lord.

Ah, but it *was*! "If you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me" (John 5:46). Abraham rejoiced that he would see his day; Isaiah saw his glory and spoke of him; was Moses alone, of all the prophets,

¹⁶ WA 50.660.26f; cf. LW 34.287.

¹⁷ WA 44.232.6.

¹⁸ WA 44.234; LW 6.313.

denied the privilege of seeing the glory of the Son in our flesh? Moses, who stood with Elijah and spoke with Jesus about the great exodus he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem? (Luke 9:28–36). “Oh you foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:25–27). “Joseph is a figure of Christ, and his descent into hell is indicated in this passage.”¹⁹ “Joseph is the image of the Son of God.”²⁰ “There cannot be a greater similarity than that between Christ crucified and Joseph.”²¹ “Now Joseph is buried and dead, and he has his Preparation and Sabbath; his father is dying too, but they will both rise again by divine power.”²²

And so the very holy and good Joseph was crucified, died, was buried, and descended into hell during these two years. Now the Lord will come and liberate, glorify, and magnify him, just as he called him, justified and gave the Holy Spirit and Son, who descended with him into prison. Now the Passion Week is at an end, for soon Joseph will be restored to life and will rise again.²³

Let us tease out a point or two from this. First, for Luther the typological depth of the Joseph-story is not mere ornamentation but the hermeneutical/spiritual key to reading the story itself well. Joseph represents Christ. Yes, his very life is an embodied prophecy. But Joseph also participates in Christ and—by way of his own hellish sufferings—is conformed to the image of Christ and him crucified.

Not least in the just-quoted excerpt, Luther has Rom 8:28–30 very much in mind. The God of Joseph is the God who works all things for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose. That “all things” includes terrible things like betrayal, violence, false accusation, unjust imprisonment, and years—years—of sheer forgottenness. God uses nasty “all things” like these for the good of his elect, by forcing them (as it were) to serve the sanctification of his children. Think about that: the most terrible things you have suffered, the most terrible things you have done, all are pressed into your service by the strong grace of your Father. For those whom he foreknew, he predestined—for what? To become just like his Son, ultimately in the happy glory of the resurrection, but first—and by way of—the strange glory of the cross. That way, Jesus will not be an only child, but the firstborn among many brothers. And all those whom our generous Father set his love upon and chose in Christ before the foundation of the world, the same he called, justified, and glorified by the gift of his Spirit

¹⁹ viz. Gen 37:24; WA 44.284; LW 6.379.

²⁰ WA 44.288; LW 6.385; cf. Rom 8:29.

²¹ WA 44.293, LW 6.392.

²² At the end of Gen 37; WA 44.303.39–40; cf. LW 6.406.

²³ On Gen 40:20–23; WA 44.394.12–16; cf. LW 7.129.

and his Son. Such a one was Joseph, our father in the faith and our brother in Christ, by the Spirit, through promise.

Now mark this well: when Joseph went down to the depths, the Son of God went right down with him. For Luther, this is the plain meaning of the paradox that frames Gen 39 (vv. 2–3, 21, 23): “But the Lord was with Joseph.” Our stunted scriptural imaginations, bludgeoned by post-Kantian dogmatic prejudice and encased within the immanent frame as by walls of ugly reinforced concrete, hear this refrain and assume it implies a vague sense of divine “presence” by way of providential effects: *Gottes Wirkung auf uns*, as Risto Saarinen’s book names and exposes. But Irenaeus and Athanasius and Hilary knew better, as did Luther and Calvin, as did—refreshingly—Robert Jenson in his last little book.²⁴ God has always made himself known through his Word/Wisdom/Glory/Radiance/Image/Son, and throughout *torah* he carries on famously with the patriarchs and matriarchs by way of this Son in the form of the Messenger of the Lord who, mysteriously, *is* the Lord (see e.g. Gen 15:1–7; 16:7–14; 18:1–21; 19:24; 22:9–18; 28:12–17 [John 1:51]; 32:22–32; 48:15–16; Exod 3; 14:19–25 [Jude 5]; Josh 5:13–6:2; cf. John 1.1: the *logos*, who was with God in the beginning, *is* God).

Sapere aude, my critically-minded friends. What do you suppose the Son of God was doing before he became flesh of Mary? Twiddling his thumbs in heaven, making the occasional appearance to an Isaiah or an Ezekiel, but mainly fretting about what Wellhausen & Friends would do to his “pre-critical,” sloppily redacted book? Not quite. I could tell you what he was doing; but I am just a man. St. John is an apostle: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . He was in the world . . . *He came to his own*” (John 1:1, 10–11). He came to his own: to Eve, to Abel, to Noah, to Abram, to Hagar, to Jacob, to Joseph. *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for all ages* (Heb 13:8). He was there the whole time: in the promise of the serpent-crushing Seed, by the side of the proto-martyr, in the ark tossed about in storm and sea, in the agonizing years of so-where-is-your-promise-now childlessness, by a spring of water in the wilderness, on Moriah the mountain of sacrifice and vision, at Bethel and in Paddan-aram and by the Jabbok, in the pit and in Potiphar’s house and in prison. And every single ancient sinner who received the Son by faith became a child of God, pure and righteous in his Maker’s sight, not by works nor by willpower but by the blood that would be shed one day by the angelo-morphic God-Man who befriended them. You see, the *logos* does not make *theologoi* from a distance. He comes close: closer than we might like. That is what he is up to in the high *Anfechtung* of St. Joseph. Jesus sends him down into hell, but he goes down with him; and by his presence, grace, and power, he transforms *Sheol* into a *Schul*:

The fastings and miracles which are recounted in the legends of our saints, Francis, Ambrose, Augustine, etc., are nothing.

What is said was lived, that’s pure child’s play. But the lives of the

²⁴ Robert Jenson, *A Theology in Outline: Can these Bones Live?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 49.

patriarchs? These are examples that show what the Christian life is, what are the true exercises of piety and of patience. Very well, there goes Joseph, we must let him rest in hell. Now Joseph is buried; let us leave him to rest in *schola* [or: *sheola*] in hell, as his father says, in his *Schul*.²⁵

Luther is commenting on Gen 37:34–36, when Jacob learns of his son’s “death.” In the last line he’s referring in particular to Jacob’s lament in v. 35: “No, I shall go down to *Sheola* to my son, mourning.” Luther had long since stopped writing out his lectures, or even notes; as in the aforementioned book by Jens, for our knowledge of his teaching we rely on the transcripts of his students. Here, the published edition of those student notes in WA 44 reflects the ambiguity that occasions this time-honored genre. Probably, Luther said: “... let us leave him to rest in *Sheol*, as his father says, in his *Schul*.” He loved his puns, and in this case, as so often, it packed a punch too: Joseph is in hell with Jesus, not by tragic necessity nor by random chance, but by the redemptive/formative purpose of the Lord.

Not only for the inhabited world, nor even for preservation of the holy “seed” lodged in Judah’s loins, but for Joseph himself. *Sheol* is his *Schul*: his school. The Son of God is his teacher; suffering, *Anfechtung*, the holy cross is his pedagogy, whip, chalk, board, books, etc., for as our experts say, only experiential learning will do. Gritty promise-grasping faith, stubborn hope in God who raises the dead, stouthearted courage in the face of real and present danger, long-suffering patience are graces that name the wisdom, science, skill, virtue, or “art” that the pupil will acquire in his master’s school.

This is the theology and wisdom (*sapientia*) of Christians, and although we have yet to attain it, we should nevertheless be exercised in it and accustomed to it (*adsuefieri*) every day, so that in the paroxysm and calamities that we undergo we’ll be able to say with steady and tranquil heart: You can’t hurt me, I’m a Christian. You don’t harm me; you just challenge me. Go fear for yourself ...

So, then: God humbles his own in order to exalt them, kills to make alive, confounds to glorify, subjects to extoll. But this is the art of arts and science of sciences (*ars artium et scientia scientiarum*), which typically isn’t learned and understood except with great labor and only by a few. Still, it’s true and certain—just as the example of Joseph testifies.²⁶

The learning outcome? By the end of his training, Jacob’s lost son will become a saint, bishop, *doctor ecclesiae*, evangelist, preacher of grace, *servus servorum Dei*, *verus Pontifex* (read: Pope), poet, and true theologian.²⁷

²⁵ WA 44.304.21–27; cf. LW 6.407.

²⁶ WA 44.299.30–34, 300.3–6; cf. LW 6.400–401.

²⁷ WA 44.571f; LW 7.365; WA 44.599f; LW 8.27f; WA 44.611; LW 8.44; WA 44.617; LW 8.51.

IV. WHAT HAPPENS IN THE FORGE?

The problem is those damn donkey ears you and I and Thérèse de Lisieux and everyone else is born with. Strip away our infinitely-crafted pretenses and we are all either sons of Adam or daughters of Eve. Each one of us loves self, hates God, other selves, and anything else that threatens to get in the way of my sacred pursuit of my own life, my own autonomy, my own happiness however I jolly well choose to define it. We are, in fact, congenital self-addicts from our mother's womb. And we remain so long after our rebirth in the Second Adam by water and the Spirit—till death completes what Christ began in our baptism and carried along at the nourishing breasts of our new mother, holy Church—certainly long after, for whatever mix of motives, we set out to become theologians. And the very fact that you are irritated with me for pointing this out proves it. Even when we pray and meditate, read Scripture and sing Psalms, share the gospel, preach sermons, write clever books, etc., we are in large part using God to serve our imperial selves.

We were given the gift of being creaturely images of the infinite God, made for loving communion with God who is love, God the Three-in-One, made to glorify and enjoy him forever. But after Adam, you and I are dead-set on praising, glorifying, and enjoying our own selves; and if we develop a taste for the things of God, it is because we instinctively sense how useful his omnipotence will prove in the pursuit of our own glory. In short: instead of using things to enjoy God, you use God to enjoy things. Well, not so much the things themselves, but your imperial self as it invents itself as a self by the demonic/adamic/Nietzschean act of conquering, colonizing, accumulating, possessing, and otherwise mastering other selves and their stuff. For what you are really after at the end of the day is just your own self: the power, beauty, glory, and permanence of the self you are not quite sure you are and feel/fear you need to shore up, secure, and solidify by decking it out in the fig leaves of doctorates, pastorates, book deals or even (if worse comes to worst) a reputation for sanctity. “But,’ you say, ‘I am born from a famous and illustrious heritage, I am a doctor of the law, I am a philosopher.’ Correct indeed! But all these are to be used, not enjoyed, according to the distinction of Augustine.”²⁸ That's Luther on Gen 41:40 in 1544, but he had been brooding on this dark Kierkegaardian theme for a long time by then. Here he is lecturing on Rom 5:3–5 in the developmentally critical winter of 1515/16, knee-deep in Augustine's advanced works against the Pelagians and neck-deep in Tauler:

If God should not test us by tribulation, it would be impossible for any man to be saved. The reason is that our nature has been so deeply curved in upon itself (*in se ipsam incurva*) because of the vice of the first sin that it not only turns the finest gifts of God in upon itself and enjoys them (as is evident in the case of legalists and hypocrites), indeed, it even uses God himself (*ipso Deo utatur*) to

²⁸ WA 44.433.22f; cf. LW 7.181.

achieve these aims, but it is ignorant of this very fact, that in acting so iniquitously and perversely and in such a depraved way, it is even seeking God for its own sake. Thus the prophet Jeremiah says in Jer 17.9: “The heart of man is perverse and inscrutable; who can understand it?” That is: it is so curved in on itself that no man, no matter how holy (if a testing is kept from him) can understand it.²⁹

Are we really that bad? Maybe you are not, but I am, and Luther was, and so were Sibbes, Owen, Newton, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer. In the Romans lecture, Luther goes on to offer a German-mystical solution to the disease of the proud/insecure self. Staupitz probably taught it to him, but he may have got it straight from Tauler:

The cross puts to death everything we have, but our iniquity tries to keep itself and its possessions alive. Therefore our very good God, after he has justified us and given us his spiritual gifts, quickly brings tribulation upon us, exercises us, and tests us so that this godless nature of ours does not rush in upon these enjoyable sins, lest in his ignorance a man perish in eternity. For they are very lovely and vigorously excite enjoyment. Thus a man learns to love and worship God purely, not just because of his grace and his gifts, but he worships God for his own sake alone. Thus “he chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb 12:6 [Prov 3:12]), and unless he did this, the son would quickly be drawn away by the sweetness of his new inheritance. He would luxuriate in his enjoyment of grace received and offend his Father more deeply than before. Therefore in the most excellent order the apostle says, “*Tribulatio* produces patience, and patience *probationem*,” that is, that we should be proven (*probat*). *And hope does not disappoint us*. Without a probation of this sort, as I have said, hope would founder, indeed, it would no longer be hope but presumption; in fact, it would be worse, for it would be enjoyment of the creature instead of the Creator. And if a person remained in this state, he would be confounded for all eternity. Therefore tribulation comes, through which a man is made patient and proven (*probat*); it comes and takes away everything he has and leaves him naked and alone, allowing him no help or safety in either his physical or spiritual merits, for it makes a man despair of all created things, to go out from them and from himself and outside himself and all things, and to seek help in God alone. Ps 3.3 sings about this: “But You, O Lord, are my upholder and my glory.” Now that’s what hoping is, and hope happens through testing (*spem fieri per probationem*). Whereas of necessity the ungodly, who are accustomed to trust in their own virtues, do not want to be quiet and to undergo tribulations in order that they may be proven . . .³⁰

²⁹ WA 56.304.23–305.2; cf. LW 25.291.

³⁰ WA 56.305.9–306.4; cf. LW 25.292.

You know what it means to luxuriate in grace received.

“Pastor, what a powerful sermon!”

“Yes, it was, wasn't it . . .”

“But what sets you apart is how *deep* you take us; most preachers today are so superficial.”

“Why thank you, that really is kind.”

“Have you thought about turning this series into a book? The broader church needs to hear your voice, not just the local parish.”

“It really does, doesn't it?”

And before you know it, you are helping your (that is: Christ's) flock get your halo set just-so on top of those donkey ears of yours, and without noticing it you have not actually *adored* the Lord for months or years because you are so busy adoring your brilliant, expositional but not in a rigid way, historically-informed, culturally-sensitive self.

The only remedy our good Father has for such a perverse poison as Adam's pride is a share in the cross of his humble Son. Our poor Lord God has no choice but to take away everything we have, so that we will be made ready for him to give us his most precious gift: himself.

He does the whole thing this way, because it is the Nature of God first to destroy and annihilate whatever is in us, before he gives his gifts; just as the Scriptures says: “The Lord makes poor and makes rich, he brings down to hell and raises up” [1 Sam 2.7, 6]. By this his most godly counsel he makes us capable of his gifts and his works. And we are capable of receiving his works and his counsels only when our own counsels have ceased and our works are quieted and we are made purely passive before God.³¹

For in this way he acted in his own proper work, which is the first and exemplar of all his own works, i.e. in Christ. And then, when he wanted to glorify him and establish him in his kingdom (as the most holy thoughts of all the disciples ardently hoped and expected) *maxime contrarie* he made him die, be confounded and descend into hell, contrary to all expectations. Thus he caused also St. Augustine to descend to the depths, and in opposition to the prayers of his mother he caused him to go astray, that he might reward her far beyond what she asked. And so he deals with all his saints.³²

³¹ Luther on Rom 8:26. WA 56.375.18–24; cf. LW 25.365.

³² WA 56.377.4–10; cf. LW 25.366.

Note that when he uses the expression, “we do not know what we should pray,” the apostle isn’t trying to say that holy and good people are asking for things which are contrary or harmful, but rather that they are asking for too little, things that are too lowly or insignificant in comparison with what God wants to give them. Therefore he says “our weakness” and not “our iniquity,” for we are too weak and impotent to make such big asks. Therefore God, hearing and coming to grant our requests, destroys our weak thinking and our still too humble ideas and gives us what the Spirit asks for us. It is as if a man should write his father asking for silver, but the father is disposed to give him a thousand pieces of gold. The father throws away the letter and disregards it, and when the son learns of this and realizes that the silver is not coming to him as he requested, he is made sad . . . This weakness will be crucified in you through the cup of suffering, and you will be made strong.³³

As an aside, to guide his students, the young friar adds: “Concerning this patience of God and suffering, see Tauler.”³⁴ That might be a bridge too far for my evangelical brethren; would you consider John Newton instead? Or here is the hymn on Jonah that concludes the penultimate chapter of Dr. Packer’s magnificent book about *Knowing God*—cherished stanzas I first learned of from Tim Keller:

I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith and love and every grace;
Might more of his salvation know,
And seek more earnestly his face.

’Twas he who taught me thus to pray
And he, I trust, has answered prayer!
But it has been in such a way
As almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that in some favored hour
At once he’d answer my request,
And by his love’s constraining pow’r
Subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;

³³ WA 56.379.26–380.15; cf. LW 25.369.

³⁴ WA 56.378.13; cf. LW 25.368.

Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low

“Lord what is this?” I trembling cried,
“Wilt thou pursue Thy worm to death?”
“Tis in this way,” the Lord replied,
“I answer prayer for grace and faith.

“These inward trials I employ
From self and pride to set thee free;
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
That thou may'st seek thy all in Me.”

Joseph learned a great deal of theology from his dad: about God, creation, sin, the promise of the serpent-crushing Seed, the righteousness of faith, the sacraments (circumcision, altar and sacrifice), the painful contrast between the suffering church of the cross and the splendid church of glory, etc. But there is theology, and then there is theology. It is one thing to think or write about God, another to know and be known by Him. One thing to unfold a sweeping trinitarian metaphysic, quite another to abide in communion with the Father, in the Spirit, through the Son. Plato or Milbank or Hart can do the one far better than you or I are likely to ever pull off; but for them “everything is merely objective . . . [they] remain in their metaphysical thinking, as a cow looks at a new door.” If all goes well for you, as it went so terribly well for our hero and as it also went for dear Jim Packer, you will enter into the kind of *mystical knowing of the living God* that Joseph was graced to receive in his Sheol-Schul. To wit: “That God cares.” That God—GOD—YHWH—HOLY! HOLY! HOLY!—*tres hypostases realiter distinctae in unitate inseparabili essentiae*—FIRE!³⁵—cares about . . . *me?*

In the whole history of Joseph we see nothing but the highest and infinite virtues in every kind of life, in prison, disgrace, exile, desertion and afterward in glory, exaltation, and power. To be sure, he was haunted and tossed up and down, backward and forward, and yet he always composed himself and held God in his eyesight and waited in hope for His work with the highest faith and forbearance.

But Joseph isn't only set before us as an exemplar of all virtues, but a description of God is also placed before our eyes in a beautiful

³⁵ Blaise Pascal: “The year of grace 1654, Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement, pope and martyr, and others in the martyrology. Vigil of St. Chrysogonus, martyr, and others. From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight, FIRE. GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. GOD of Jesus Christ. My God and your God. Your GOD will be my God. Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD.” Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony Levi, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 178.

manner, in order that we may know *quid sit Deus*. Philosophers dispute and search speculatively *de Deo* and arrive at some kind of *notitiam*, just as Plato intuitively and recognizes the divine government of the universe. But everything is merely objective; it isn't yet that *cognitio* which Joseph has: that God cares, that he hears and helps the afflicted. This, Plato is not able to establish. He remains *in cogitatione Metaphysica, wie ein kue ein neues thor ansihet*. But that at last is *vera cognitio* by which we recognize that God is willing, wise, and mighty to help and to have mercy, as when Joseph firmly establishes: "God will not abandon me, even if I must face my death." Likewise: "God does not respect or care for you because of your power, even if you are prince of the whole world." On his left, he is not broken by his sufferings; on his right, he is not puffed up by his success.

This, then, is *vera cognitio Dei*: to know that his nature and will are what he reveals in the Word, where he promises that he will be my Lord and God and commands me to take hold of this nature and will by faith. There indeed lies a sure and firm foundation, in which souls find rest.³⁶

Plato is not always wrong, and David Hart has beautiful things to say about God. But the *Timaeus* will not do you any good when your brothers betray you and *The Beauty of the Infinite* will puff you up if you make a thing out of reading it. But Joseph . . . Joseph has learned to *know* God, the real God of the Bible, who hides himself in flesh and suffering and cross and *eo ipso* makes himself known. Sure, he knows all about the *ipsum esse subsistens* that God simply is. He knows Boethius' definition of a person cold. He can talk processions, relations of origin, and subsistent relations all day long. On the hypostatic union, he outmans Chemnitz himself. None of this is unimportant; for everything there is a season. But after the forge, Joseph has bigger fish to fry. Or, he knows now what these high-powered terms, definitions, and distinctions are for. He knows how to use them rightly, now that he has become a holy fool in Christ. For Joseph has graduated from that divinity school where a crucified headmaster so thoroughly humbles his own that, when the time comes to raise them from the pit and institute them into the office of the Word, it does not go straight to their heads.

For it was far more difficult to retain the Word after his liberation than *in calamitate et tentatione*, in the bearing of which he was unconquered (*invictus*), did not defect from God, did not sin by impatience and indignation against God. But far greater strength of heart is required when he conquers himself (*seipsum vincit*) for this is the highest and most beautiful virtue, as Solomon says in Prov 16. "Better is a patient man than a strong man, and he who lords over his soul (*dominatur animo*) than the conqueror of a city" [v. 32]. In this life, the highest glory is in military matters,

³⁶ WA 44.591.26–592.9; cf. LW 8.17.

as the most remarkable gifts were present in Achilles, Alexander the Great, Scipio; but to these bravest of heroes Solomon prefers Joseph, David, and Moses. And not one of them can be compared to Joseph, since he is ruler of his own soul (*dominator animi sui*) through humility.³⁷

V. CONCLUSION: TRUE THEOLOGY AND TRUE THEOLOGIANS

There are two interrelated sides to this happy outcome: one to do with the character of true theology, the other with the character of the theologian. True theology is *Worttheologie*, a theology delighted by, bound to, obsessed with, soaked in the Word of God in its two parts: promise and command, law and gospel. This is the true knowledge of God: not to cook up clever thoughts about what we think he ought to be like, but to listen to what God has in fact told us of himself, his heart, his purposes, his mighty deeds, *in Verbo*. To hear and heed the Bible, that is, and to echo it as faithfully as we can.

But you must not stop at that, not if you wish to live the life of God. For God is the One who raised his Son Jesus from the dead, having previously raised up his people Israel from bondage in Egypt, having previously raised up his servant Joseph from the pit, having previously promised redemption/righteousness/blessing to whoever clings to the Seed of Eve, having previously created all things out of nothing. Come what may, you must learn to trust the promise of this untamed yet faithful God. You must obey his command to take him at his word, to take him for the God he tells you he is. You must grab on to him in the flesh he took of Mary, really present *PRO TE* in the Word, baptism, Eucharist, absolution and yes, in his *heilige Kreuz*; and you must not let him go until he blesses you.³⁸ You must climb up the mountain with the fire and the knife in your trembling hands, with your son at your side and the wood on his back. And even if he slays you, refuse to stop hoping in him.

³⁷ Luther on Gen 41:40. WA 44.436.10–20; cf. LW 7.184–85.

³⁸ On Gen 32:6: “I shall cling to the Word of God and be content with it. There I shall die: there I shall live. There is sufficiently abundant protection in the promise of God not only against the devil, the flesh, and the world but also against this sublime temptation. For if God were to send an angel to say: ‘Do not believe these promises!’ I would reject him, saying: ‘Depart from me, Satan, etc.’ Or, if God himself appeared to me in his majesty and said: ‘You are not worthy of my grace; I will change my counsel and I will not keep my promise to you,’ there I would not give him ground, but it would have to be fought out bitterly against God himself. It is as Job says: ‘Even if he kills me, nevertheless, I will hope in him’ (Job 13:15). If he should cast me off into the depths of hell and place me in the midst of devils, nevertheless, I believe that I am going to be saved: because I have been baptized, I have been absolved, I have received the pledge of my salvation, the body and blood of the Lord in the Supper. Therefore I want to see and hear nothing else, but I shall live and die in this faith, whether God, or an angel, or the devil says the contrary.” WA 44.97.37–98.9; cf. LW 6.131.

To laugh at death and hell and to conquer is not the mark of a weakling but of an unconquered and fearless heart, the heart of a lion.³⁹

Do this, suffer this, conquer by devil-and-death-defying *hope* in our lionhearted Lamb, and you will find that you have become a *Worttheologe crucis* in the depths of your bleeding soul. You will hold the praise of men in contempt. You will fear nothing but the loss of God. And because of his promise, you will not even be scared of that. You will care nothing about status, be it high or low, rich or poor, known or unknown, laughed at or celebrated; it will all matter about as much to you as the pecking order in my daughter's middle school class matters to St. Michael the Archangel. There will be but one thing, that is to say One Living Reality (he is also Three), left for you to long for.

Christ—the Bishop of souls, and the one who looks into hell and death—ALONE sees, ALONE cares for Joseph; and he rejoices that such a beautiful sacrifice is being offered to him. Therefore, when everything looks desperate, and there isn't so much as a sliver of support or solace left—that's where the Lord's help begins, who says: "I'm with you, Joseph; let my looking after you be enough for you."⁴⁰

Whom have I in heaven but You?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire, besides You.

My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

For behold: those who are far from You shall perish;

You put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to You.

But for me, it is good to be near God.

I have made YHWH GOD my refuge,
that I may tell of all *your* works. (Ps 73:25–28)

Not mine. Yours.

³⁹ WA 44.427.20–22; cf. LW 7.173.

⁴⁰ Luther on Gen 39:21–23. WA 44.373.37–41; cf. LW 7.100.