

Reclaiming Our Christ-Centered Lutheran Devotional Heritage

Part 4: Growing in the Gift of Testing

*Grow
in
Grace*

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Professor Rich Gurgel

RECLAIMING OUR CHRIST-CENTERED LUTHERAN HERITAGE

PART 4: GROWING IN THE GIFT OF TESTING¹

INTRODUCTION

As we conclude this series of essays, and as we come to the last of the three ways Luther believed God shapes his theologians, we have another challenge of definition. What does Luther mean by *tentatio*? It may help to use the German term, *Anfechtung*, but that doesn't immediately clear up the confusion for all of us. Here's Luther's own description of what he means with *tentatio*.

Thirdly, there is *tentatio*, *Anfechtung*. This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.

Thus you see how David, in the Psalm mentioned, complains so often about all kinds of enemies, arrogant princes or tyrants, false spirits and factions, whom he must tolerate because he meditates, that is, because he is occupied with God's Word (as has been said) in all manner of ways. 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 assaults will teach you to seek and love God's Word. I myself (if you will permit me, mere mouse-dirt, to be mingled with pepper) am deeply indebted to my papists that through the devil's raging they have beaten, oppressed, and distressed me so much. That is to say, they have made a fairly good theologian of me, which I would not have become otherwise. And I heartily grant them what they have won in return for making this of me, honor, victory, and triumph, for that's the way they wanted it. (Spitz 1960, 288)

When Luther speaks of *tentatio*, he is referring to the daily spiritual warfare that every Christian faces as Satan seeks to team up with the unbelieving world and our own unbelieving flesh to drive a wedge between us and our Savior.

But exactly how is this a *gift* of God? While we may often forget that *oratio* and *meditatio* are gifts of God, yet the problem of proper perception may be even more basic and inbred here. Our arrogant

¹This essay is the fourth of a five part series. The first part of the series ("***Drawing Our Devotional Life from the Gospel***") sought to explore the gospel-centered approach to personal Word and prayer that has been a hallmark of Lutheran spirituality over the centuries. The next three parts – including this essay - focus one by one on helping us understand a Lutheran approach to the three ways Luther believed God grows a theologian: *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *tentatio*. The fifth part of the series is a resource packet that a pastor can use to plan ways to strengthen his personal time in Word and prayer. That last part also includes books and schedules that some pastors have found useful for their devotional life.

Those who have not read the first three parts of the series are encouraged to do so before reading this essay since there is a logical flow of thought that follows along through all four essays.

natural hearts are repulsed with the whole idea of struggle and suffering being listed on the plus side of life's ledger.

But perhaps an analogy may help. Many of you may join me in giving thanks to God for the gift of Christian parents. In my family of origin, I have no doubt what the greatest part of the gift of Christian parents was. I give thanks for parents, though each was indeed *simul justus et peccator*,² whom God taught to understand very clearly that youngest son possessed an eternal soul in need of constant nurture through the means of grace. They didn't treat baptism as if it were merely some kind of one time purchase of ecclesiastical fire insurance. While respecting the beauty of the miracle the Holy Spirit wrought in my heart on November 15, 1959, they recognized that as Christian parents they were God's instruments to take me back to the water of my baptism day after day. It was a challenge for my Lutheran elementary school teachers, high school, college, or seminary instructors to share with me a Bible story that had not been heard on my mother's lap many times over as she prepared to pray with me at night. Similarly, even in the midst of a busy parish ministry and district presidency, my father saw to it that every evening – almost without fail – the devotion from meditations was read, the prayer and Lord's Prayer spoken, and the "home version" of the benediction ("The Lord bless us...") was pronounced over himself and his gathered family. How were Christian parents a rich gift of God to me? Simple. They led me again and again to Word and prayer.

How is *tentatio* a gift of God? Simple — though so hard to remember! In the plans God has for us — plans to prosper us and not to harm us (Jeremiah 29:11) — the trials, struggles, and testings of everyday life have been designed to take us by the hand and lead us again and again back to Word and prayer. The reason that Christian parents are a gift to us is the same reason that *tentatio* is a gift to us. Yes, that is true even though Satan is always hoping that the same trials, struggles, and testings destroy us.³ But in this, Luther maintains, Satan proves himself to be God's fool.

Amazingly, God does not just allow Satan to attack us in this way; He actually uses it to fulfill His plans for us. The devil, says Luther, is God's fool. He unwittingly ends up doing God's work. Satan's strategy usually backfires on him by driving people to Christ rather than away from Him. Satan's attacks on the saints are often ineffectual and counterproductive, for, unless they are carefully managed, they result in repentance and the consolidation of faith in Christ. (Kleinig 2008, 233)

² I confess to seeing much more clearly the *peccator* portion of that dual nature during the days of my youth. Even now, as my parents are long gone home to heaven, I am still learning to grasp ever more clearly all that God gave me through parents whom he had taught to trust in his declaration of *justus*.

³ 2 Corinthians 12:7 is a wonderfully instructive verse to ponder as it gives us a unique glimpse into the opposing lines of battle (God's and Satan's) at work in the trials and difficulties of our lives. Notice that the physical ailment against which Paul was struggling had been "given me" (and the reference clearly is to an act of God), and yet in the same sentence that "thorn in the flesh" is identified as "a messenger of Satan." That both can be true in one and the same struggle is an astounding truth of this battle for our welfare (or destruction) that is being waged every day. Scripture seems to hint at this dual way to view each trouble in life by using the same terms in the original languages for that which we might variously translate "testing" (when we are speaking of what God is seeking to do in a trial of life) and "tempting" (when we are speaking about what Satan is hoping to accomplish in that very same trial). The fact that Scripture is comfortable using the same word for both truths doesn't make our distinction unbiblical, but it does remind us that there are opposing forces at work in ways far beyond our limited understanding in one and the same "struggle" of life.

Yes, we are involved in an all-out spiritual war for our souls. But we know who has been declared the winner: Jesus, and us with him (Romans 7:25). So as this series of essays reaches its closing section, here is some battle tested wisdom from Scripture to help us enjoy that victory more every day as we learn to receive *tentatio* more as a gift each day!

GOD'S TRAINING OF OUR HEARTS FOR WAR (PSALM 144:1)

First, do not be surprised at the intensity of the struggle or that struggle is the **default mode** of your Christian life this side of heaven! “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12). Since God’s Word never speaks in a vacuum, never addresses non-existent challenges, you can be certain that, when it tells us “not to be surprised at the painful trial” and not to falsely conclude that “something strange” is happening to us, that is precisely what our sinful nature assumes whenever life does not go as we had planned.⁴

Whenever we are “surprised” by our painful trials and think something “strange” is afoot, we are succumbing to the most subtle (and typical) form of millennial thinking that exists. Now, writing this essay for WELS pastors as the primary audience, I have not for a moment considered including a warning about any kind of growing belief in our midst in “gross” millennialism. While forms of “chiliasm” have at times bothered some within the Lutheran Church, God has graciously spared our ministerium from foolish debates about “some Jewish teachings” as our Confessions call them (Formula of Concord, XVII). Nor am I hinting here about what in dogmatics class we have called “subtle millennialism”: the conviction that some great and glorious day is just waiting for the visible church (or at least my congregation) if we would only get our act together and do ministry the right way.⁵ But it is in our personal lives that all Christians have always struggled against the most subtle form of millennial thinking that there is. It can be worded this way: if we are dearly loved saints and priests serving under the King of Kings who rules all things, then should we not rightly expect our lives right now to look like they are under such perfect protection at all times (or at least as the default mode)? Just read the opening verses of Psalm 73 if you want to see a believer (Asaph), in what he later identifies as full brute-beast “lather” (verse 22), suffering from precisely this most subtle millennial thinking. When the warfare being waged around us – and primarily within us – catches us by “surprise” as if something

⁴ We also do well to ponder the impact of living in a “comfortable” culture in which we have learned so many ways to insulate ourselves from trouble. With central heat and central air we have learned to shelter ourselves from much of the changeableness of the weather. We construct our financial safety nets personally and fight for such programs nationally. We have discovered medications to end or ease so many health difficulties. All such things certainly can be received as gifts of God. But in the midst of it we may more than we realize begin to think of ourselves immune from God’s curse of frustration (Romans 8:20) upon a the creation because of the fall of the crown of his creation. Millennialism has not gone away in a secular culture. Science, medicine, and technology have taken over from God in bringing the golden age. While a postmodern pessimism has blunted that strong belief somewhat, we still do well to ponder the impact on us of living in such a culture. Is there found here an extra reason for us to think that trial and difficulty are “surprising” or “strange”?

⁵ A warning about “subtle millennialism” is not intending to provide a cloak under which to hide a uniquely Lutheran ministerial sloppiness. We dare not dress up pastoral arrogance or laziness under a pious sounding façade as if being theologians of the cross means that we can avoid examining personal and corporate ministry methods and practices for that which may long ago have ceased to serve the gospel well. Suffering losses outwardly in the visible church because of the foolishness of the gospel is one thing. Sustaining losses in the church because we are preaching and administering the gospel foolishly is quite another. Decreasing “numbers” are no more a sure sign of faithfulness than increasing “numbers” are a sure sign of compromise.

“strange” were going on, we may very soon find ourselves braying discordantly along with Asaph’s all-too-unfinished symphony.

Caught by “surprise” in these “strange” life situations, our sinful nature’s self-defensive and self-justification tendencies get us in heart (if not with mouth) to direct our brute-beast-braying in one of three directions.

Especially if we are surrounded by friends like Job — and that is a given since at least our conscience is always with us — our first reaction may be to assume that God must be getting us for something we’ve done wrong. While perhaps at first we may object that we’ve done nothing worthy of what is happening to us, if our conscience is active at all, it won’t be long before the “surprising” or “strange” events don’t seem so “surprising” or “strange” at all. Soon we will begin to conclude that perhaps the natural *lex talionis* is at work: what is happening to us is being served up by a just God as a natural “gotcha” for some action on our part. What makes this particular thinking particularly powerful is that viewed strictly from God’s law there will always be sufficient evidence of our own sinfulness to supply endless recriminations from our conscience.

Of course, we typically merely scan the horizon of our lives for “big ticket” outward sins rather than coming to the even more honest sobering realization that, since our natural heart is “deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jeremiah 17:9), we are constantly supplying God with endless reasons justly to make our lives a living hell. But, stopping short of such a recognition that any idea of bargaining with God for better treatment is useless, we can begin to proudly bray at ourselves to do better as we seek to find the outward corrections that will guarantee that such “surprising” or “strange” things don’t happen again for a very long time!

But braying at and blaming self is not our only path when we falsely conclude that “surprising” or “strange” things are happening to us. Our sinful nature is also fond of finding scapegoats in the other “donkeys” around us. Here Job’s friends are not the poster children, but Aaron is as high priest of Israel at Mt. Sinai. Recall what happened when Moses, still red-faced from finding out that it was not the sound of war he heard rising from the camp, confronted his brother about letting things get out of control. Recall the donkey like braying by which Aaron sought to explain the “strange” and “surprising” events going on around him. He blamed the people God had given him to serve: “You know how prone these people are to evil.” He even blamed, what from his own words, must have been a very creative furnace: “They gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!” (Exodus 32:22-24). When we imitate Aaron in life and ministry in the midst of our “surprising” and “strange” trials by casting about for scape goats, Satan wins multiple battles as we begin to spread the guilt liberally around to all unfortunate enough to be near us on our “no good, horrible, very bad day.” Perhaps chief among the battles Satan is winning at that moment is that he is leading us as pastors to resent the very sheep Jesus has given us to serve!

But sooner or later, if we continue to assume what is happening to us is something “surprising” or “strange,” our braying begins to be directed at God. After all, what has happened is evidence that he’s either been sleeping or disinterested since surely he could have prevented what is plaguing us if he so desired.⁶ While we may not have the “courage” of Asaph to express it as openly and brazenly as he, we

⁶ While this could be the subject of a whole other essay, sadly more right within the visible church are siding with the even greater temptation here and proclaiming that God just may not be so much in control of his world as

can easily grow angry with God for breaking our imagined “bargain” with him to be good to us for all the times we have so faithfully kept our hearts pure and washed our hands in innocence (verse 13). And what does God give us in return for our piety? “All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning” (verse 14). We pastors — so deeply involved in outwardly pious activities — can be particularly vulnerable to these particular brute-beast-brayings.

And all this loud braying in multiple directions springs from an unbiblical assumption that Scripture must tell us somewhere that life for the faithful child of God should be outwardly peaceful if we are minding our “p’s and q’s.” While justly distancing ourselves theologically from those who preach and teach “a theology of glory,” we must remain humbly aware of how easily we think that way in our personal lives when *tentatio* comes calling!

Instead of braying defensively and self-righteously internally, horizontally, or vertically, how much better, when trials, testings, and struggles make their daily visit to our lives, to say this to ourselves:

If God would deal with me justly I would deserve far worse than this even just for the sins I am unaware of today. But the words of the benediction he left ringing in my ears last Sunday are not a lie. Behind these struggles that seem to reveal a big divine frown is in fact my gracious Father’s eternally smiling face. At his Son’s cross, he frowned on Jesus in my place so that for me nothing is left but a face shining with grace. Under his look of favor I can live at peace. That is true even though God has lovingly told me ahead of time that my life will regularly imitate my dear Lord Jesus’ time of suffering. Yet, standing in him, I trust that my Father is still in Jesus as well pleased with me as he was well pleased with him! My sinful nature may be stunned at the moment, but nothing “surprising” or “strange” is really happening here. Of that his grace assures me!

It is just such fleeing to the shadow of the cross, and there learning to embrace our own cross that Jesus promised we would also find there, that we learn this first and most important soldierly skill in the midst of the spiritual warfare that is *tentatio*. What is happening to us is most definitely not “surprising” or “strange.”

And one more thought before leaving this tip behind, when our hearts are struggling with anger and frustration over the wickedness that appears to be running wild in our world in general or in our particular corner of it, the “good Christian thing to do” is **not** to bury that anger deep within and deny that we feel it. When anger is “buried alive” it tends to come back as multiple mischievous ghosts who haunt us spiritually and emotionally. Even though “righteous anger” is particularly hard for those who are *simul justus et peccator*, we are wise to pour out our troubled souls to our God. We are wise to pour out such anger before God even though mixed in with the “righteous anger” we must confess is more than a little frustration with God himself and an impatience that may be ready to “cut off” the neighbor or neighbors involved. When we think that the best path is to say nothing even to God when we are angry, then it is good for us to ask why Psalm 73 — and many other similar psalms — are a part of the

we’ve been led to believe. Even in somewhat “conservative” biblical circles, the concept of “Openness Theology” is loudly suggesting that since the future is left “open” by God to give man room for “free will,” many things that happen globally or individually catch God by surprise. He can only react “after the fact.” In other words, when trouble comes, we are foolish to get angry with God for not loving us or for not paying closer attention. The solution is to learn that God is as frustrated as we are about some of the decisions that he suddenly sees human beings making. The best thing we can do is to work in partnership with God to undo the unforeseen mess.

canon. God already knows we are angry — and often angry with him. The “psalms of lament” found in Scripture provide us with words to talk about that. Perhaps just the number of such “laments” in Scripture testifies again to this first key insight in the battle: days of trial and struggle are not so “surprising” and “strange” after all.

Once we have reminded ourselves that struggles in life are **not** all that “surprising” or “strange,” the next challenge is to recognize in this battle where the frontline of the war really is. Soldiers of the cross must remember that the real frontline of this spiritual war is our own hearts, or, to be more precise, our conscience. While the eternal goal of the battle is that “the Lord will rescue [us] from every evil attack and will bring [us] safely to his heavenly kingdom” (2 Timothy 4:18), the temporal battlefield objective is “holding on to faith and a good conscience” (1 Timothy 1:19). Satan knows where the frontline of the battle is, even if we forget. That’s why his target is our hearts.

The upshot of Satan's strategy with us as Christians is that the conscience is the battlefield, the place where we fight the good fight. The main battle is not waged out there in the world, but right here in our souls. Here in our conscience we "fight the good fight" by "holding faith and a good conscience." That fight is not won by going on a crusade against the forces of darkness and their strongholds in the world around us. Instead, it is won by retaining and using what have received from God, faith in Christ and the good conscience that comes through faith in Christ. (Kleinig 2008, 226)

It is so easy to imitate in our own little way the mistakes of the Crusades of the Middle Ages and see our main task in this war as going on the attack against the fortresses of evil we see “out there” in the world. For example, consider how many in our country believe everything would be better if only there were (take your pick): prayer in the public schools, the Ten Commandments displayed prominently in every courtroom, or boycotts declared on any corporation that seems to offer aid and comfort to the LGBT community. While that multiple choice may be easy for Confessional Lutherans to recognize as missing the point, we too can all too easily get caught up in losing sight of where the main battles in this war will be fought. It is so much more intriguing, and less humbling, to think that our main struggle with evil happens “out there” against enemies and influences in society and the church against whom we wear the white hats against those coiffured in black. But while there is certainly plenty of very real evil to uncover in the society or visible church around us, focusing on such outward reconnaissance missions can easily distract us from the real heart of the battle that needs our primary attention.

The topic of spiritual warfare, which, for almost two centuries, had been largely neglected by Christians in the western world and treated with skepticism by academic theologians for even longer, has once again become fashionable. And that, on the whole, is good. However, much that is said and written on this topic is not very useful, helpful, or even true. Some popular teachings are, in fact, misleading and dangerous.

The trouble is that we long for what is sensational and spectacular. So it is easy to get away from the clear teaching of Christ and His apostles on this topic. We become fascinated by speculation about demons and soul ties, intergenerational sin and spiritual strongholds in our environment, demon possession, and methods of exorcism. And that type of speculation plays into the hands of Satan. He uses the pornography of evil, with its promise of religious knowledge and power, to promote idle curiosity and unhealthy fascination. (Kleinig 2008, 219)

And the more our attention gets drawn away from the fact that our greatest struggle is against our own natural hearts, we end up being blind-sided when we suddenly notice that we are still wrestling against sin and doubt and fear in our own hearts. Kleinig continues:

If we are to grasp the dynamics of spiritual warfare, we should not begin with notions of demon possession and exorcism. We must, instead, begin with Paul's teaching that we were all, without exception, God's enemies (Romans 5:10). (Kleinig 2008, 222)

The issue of spiritual warfare becomes even more acute once a person becomes a disciple of Christ. It is, of course, true that we who were once God's enemies are now His friends through faith in Christ. Although we are now reconciled with God the Father, our old nature, the old rebellious self, still remains in us. And its mentality is utterly hostile to God (8:7). It remains insubordinate and self-righteous, despite its suppression by the Holy Spirit and despite the new nature that we have in Christ. That hostility is disguised and dressed up in apparent acquiescence, as is often the case with a passive-aggressive person. So, once we are united with Christ, the conscience becomes the main battleground. Any attacks from the world around us, no matter how real, merely divert and distract us from that chief place of engagement. We ourselves are the battlefield. (Kleinig 2008, 223–223)

Anyone who grasps the truth that the main battlefield for each one of us in this war is right within our own hearts will not be stunned when he/she struggles against temptations to pride or despair, to arrogance or doubt, to sins covert and sins overt. Anyone who grasps the reality of this daily warfare within his own heart will then also not be stunned to find evil “out there” in every direction. We will not be stunned when sin shows itself at our Lutheran schools or in our congregations. We won't watch the news and be utterly perplexed where all this evil comes from. We will know — from painful personal examination of our own hearts — that the natural human heart is an unending fountain of “evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly” (Mark 9:21-22). Until I take seriously the war going on within my own heart, I will never deal wisely with any struggle against evil found outside my heart. I will veer wildly either towards being overly tolerant or harshly judgmental.⁷ It's not just charity that begins at home. It is war. That means the first one who must die each day in this war is our old self.⁸

As we consider that our own hearts are the main battlefield, it is also good to remember at the same time that this attack on our hearts will tend to show up right in the midst of our daily God-given callings.

We need to fight the battle in the right place. Since nothing much seems to happen in our humdrum lives, we are tempted by our impatience to seek out dramatic encounters and glorious victories. So we leave our post and go out in search of Satan and high adventure in spiritual warfare, much like Harry Potter. That's just what Satan wants us to do. He wants us to abandon our post, our station in life, so that he can lead us on a wild, spiritual goose chase.

⁷ Consider what happens when we go on crusades against brothers within our synod. For example, as much as we need to be aware of the unbiblical assumptions of what is labeled “church growth,” how quickly Satan throws us off target as we name names of those we perceive as “troubling Israel.” Convinced that the cause of righteousness is on our side, how quickly we can become blind to where our own heart (and theology) is struggling. This doesn't mean we never speak warnings to one another – or that church discipline is passé. It does mean that, when our brother has truly been wounded in battle, we approach humbly to heal someone on the same side in the war.

⁸ That takes us right back to why our daily personal time of *oratio* and *meditatio* is such a needed gift from God!

The place for battle is our station in life, the place where God has put us. If we remain there, we do not need to look for the enemy; Satan will come out of hiding and engage in battle with us right there. Our post is our given location in our family, the world, and the church. Christ puts us there and appoints us to guard duty together with Him. There we stand on guard for the saints, the holy people of God, those whom God has placed in our care. There we guard holy ground, the territory that Christ has conquered, and the people that belong to Him as subjects. (Kleinig 2008, 260)

It is right from within the “dull” and “mundane” tasks we carry out in our callings as pastors, husbands, and fathers that we will find more than enough attacks being launched against “faith and a good conscience.” It is right there that we need, as Scripture urges us so regularly, to stay “awake” and “alert.”⁹

But it is not enough to know that daily battle is not surprising, or where the primary attacks take place (our hearts), or in what context we should expect them to occur (in our God-given vocations). We also need to be sure we have properly identified the real enemy and then accurately assessed our enemy’s strength. When Jesus confronted the Pharisees about their unbelief, he did not fail to identify who the real enemy was. “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). While it is certainly true that we can say with the psalm writer, “Do not I hate those who hate you, O Lord?” (Psalm 139:21), yet with Jesus we also do well to recognize the difference between our true eternal enemy (Satan himself – and the demons in league with him) and those who are his prisoners of war, captured by his lies. Such a distinction does not need at all to blunt the honesty of our calls to repentance, but it does prevent us from washing our hands of those whose time of grace has not yet run out. It also prevents us from failing to keep our eye on the real enemy who is a far greater danger to us than his captives.

And having identified the real enemy, what is an accurate assessment of his fighting strength? There is, as in all spiritual truths, a biblical middle ground surrounded by inaccurate assessments on two sides. On the one side is the danger of *underestimating* Satan’s fighting strength. We do that if we forget that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). Consider what we are told in the midst of the otherwise mysterious event of the struggle for Moses’ body. There we are told that “even the archangel Michael...did not dare to bring a slanderous

⁹There is much wisdom in giving opportunities to Christians young and old to experience temporary service in far-flung mission fields. There they often experience the joy of “front line” mission work. Yet we dare never give the impression that front line battles within the kingdom of God are not being fought also right within our callings in our marriages and families and workplaces and schools and congregations. The danger is to allow our “mission field” experiences to become an escape rather than teaching us to appreciate the battles being fought on the home front as well. We don’t want to rejoice in victories of the gospel being won in China for the souls of others (as if the battle was only engaged there), only to find that by our inattention to the struggle all around us we suffer defeat for our souls and the souls of others entrusted to our care right in our own “boring little backyard.” It is not a matter of “either/or” but of “both/and.” We must keep our eyes open to the very real struggles being fought in our “regular” vocations and the very real good for the kingdom that is done when by God’s grace those battles are fought and won with his strength. Such victories in our dull little backyards will never make the headlines in the *New York Times*, and perhaps may not even grace the cover of *Forward in Christ* or be featured *WELS Connection*, but those are just as real and important “front line” victories as anything occurring anywhere in the world.

accusation against [the devil]; but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you.’” If even archangels must have a healthy grasp of the power of the enemy, how much more we who are mere flesh and blood. Think how Luther makes this point so powerfully in the Large Catechism. After granting the spiritual trouble our own flesh and the unbelieving world already contribute to our spiritual neediness, he adds:

Moreover, you will surely have the devil around you, too. You will not entirely trample him underfoot because our Lord Christ could not entirely avoid him. Now, what is the devil? Nothing else than what the Scriptures call him: a liar and murderer. A liar who entices the heart away from God’s Word and blinds it, making you unable to feel your need or to come to Christ. A murderer who begrudges you every hour of your life. If you could see how many daggers, spears, and arrows are aimed at you every moment, you would be glad to come to the sacrament as often as you can. The only reason we go about so securely and heedlessly is that we neither imagine nor believe that we are in the flesh, in the wicked world, and under the kingdom of the devil. (Kolb and Wengert 2000, Large Catechism Fifth Part: The Sacrament of the Altar, 80–82)

Especially as pastors it is important that we do not underestimate our enemy. While, as an earlier essay in this series reminded us, all Christians are marked by Satan for slaughter (Romans 8:36), it is especially you who have sheep following you that Satan loves to “sift like wheat” (Luke 22:31). We ignore his significant power, and our own corresponding vulnerability, not only at the risk of our own souls, but also at the risk of every soul who follows after us as we follow Christ.

But once again, balance is critical. There is also the danger in *overestimating* Satan’s power, as if he were actually a rival in strength to God (a deceit he would love to foster since it mirrors the proud temptation that appears to have been his downfall!). If angels still perfect in their glory are pictured in humility veiling their faces in God’s presence (Isaiah 6:2), that also reminds us that he who is more than a match for us is no match for our Lord and the power of his Word. That is why, as those who in Christ take our stand in the Lord and in his mighty strength, James can say to us point blank: “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

But our encouragement in this battle is even far greater than the fact that he who is with us is greater than he who is with them. As *tentatio* sends us running back to Word and prayer (God’s purpose all along!) there we are again and again reminded that we are on the side that has already won the war. As fierce as the battle may appear within and around us at times, his Word tells us that what we are seeing are the final frantic death throes of an enemy whose head has been crushed. This is the glorious truth the hymn writer captured when he wrote:

And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph-song,
And hearts are brave again and arms are strong. (CW 551:5)

Make no mistake about it: Satan has been hurled down from heaven. Jesus has defeated and disgraced him. All who take refuge in the blood of the Lamb possess a victory against which Satan is powerless (Revelation 5:7ff).

Do we also grasp the impact of this truth that we are already victorious in this war when it comes to our whole worldview? As we run back to Word and prayer day by day, we are reminded, that despite the battles raging around and within us, we are right now already “more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Romans 8:37). Even though in the midst of this struggle we imitate Christ in his humiliation,

not his exaltation, yet this does not mean we walk in gloomy pessimism. As we carry our cross, we say with Christ that “the boundary lines have fallen for [us] in pleasant places” (Psalm 16:6).¹⁰ We are on the side of the victors, not the defeated. Carrying our cross does not lead us to live as if life were nothing but a death march orchestrated to the tune of a gloomy funeral dirge. While we know that we live by faith and not by sight, theologians of the cross do not need to close our eyes when God gives us glimpses of our victory already now. Even under the cross, God in his tender compassion for us often grants evidence that his Word does not return empty both in the fruit the Spirit produces in our lives and in the life of his church. While in our baptism we died and our life “is now hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3), God graciously does not let all evidence of growth and victory in his kingdom remain hidden. He deals with us gently by allowing us glimpses of the power of that life at work in us and others. We dare not be so afraid of the theology of glory that we fail to grasp that even under the curse of sin the whole earth is still full of his glory (Isaiah 6:2)! Such is our confidence that we can in the back of our minds always be humming victory tunes even while the bullets of the battle are flying all around us. Though the hymn writer was correct that “I walk in danger all the way;” he was just as correct when in the climax of his hymn he also penned: “My walk is heav’nward all the way.” It is with the victors’ courage and confidence – and yes, joy – that we carry our crosses. We learn that too from Jesus, “who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame” (Hebrews 12:2).

CONCLUSION¹¹

“I shall do my best to let you know how I go about praying. May our gracious Lord help you and others do it better than I. Amen.” (Luther 1983, 5)

¹⁰ As much as I appreciated Kleinig’s approach to spiritual warfare (as numerous quotations from him in this section testify), he worked so hard throughout his book to oppose a theology of glory that he seemed to have lost his balance. For instance, again and again Kleinig sought to oppose a Pentecostal or charismatic view of “possessing” the Spirit (swallowing him, as Luther said, feathers and all), yet I could not find a single place in the book that Kleinig emphasized the biblical sense of possessing the Spirit. Ever since our baptism we are his temples (1 Corinthians 6:19) who have received the Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come (Ephesians 1:14). Such a possession of the Spirit isn’t opposed to our need to be filled with the Spirit daily through the means of grace (the real problem Kleinig wants to head off). How much better to allow the gift of the Spirit and his daily coming to us in Word and sacraments to exist side by side as parallel biblical teachings serving unique purposes.

¹¹Remember that the fifth part of this series is a still-developing resource packet that (so far) includes:

- Two pages of planning documents you can use for how you might grow even more in God’s gifts of *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*.
- A review of the book most frequently quoted in this essay, John Kleinig’s *Grace upon Grace*.
- Brief reviews of various devotional tools and reading calendars that pastors in surveys and in discussions have shared as useful for their personal devotions.

The goal is to continue to expand this resource packet as other tools are suggested or developed by brothers in the ministry.

A workshop has also been produced that offers circuits, conferences, and districts up to nine hours of study and discussion. The workshop provides an interactive process of study and discussion aimed at helping us all grow in putting our Lutheran devotional heritage to work in their lives.

Finally, for-credit courses on campus, at satellite locations, and online will also be developed on this topic.

So rich is our grace-focused Lutheran heritage in regard to our devotional life, that I am keenly aware that even in an all too lengthy series of essays I have only scratched the surface of that gift handed down to us. So frustrating are my old Adam's attacks against my own understanding, appreciation and practice of that heritage, that I am keenly aware that there is so much more that could be said so much better. That's why I have ended where this series began: haltingly echoing Luther's prayer. May our gracious Lord lead you to pray better than I, so that you may never tire of discovering "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Ephesians 3:18). There, in daily Word and prayer, Jesus waits to meet you. And there, even as trials and struggle send you racing back to Word and prayer, you will always find gifts of grace untold.

+ *In Nomine Jesu* +

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DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR USE WITH GROUPS

The essay makes the point that *tentatio* is a gift of God for the same reason we would list Christian parents as a gift of God: they both regularly lead the child of God back to Word and prayer. Evaluate the helpfulness of that comparison.

How great is the challenge for us of being “surprised” when trials and troubles come? To put it another way, how much do we struggle with what the essay called the “most subtle form of millennial thinking” (4)? How can we help ourselves and others be less surprised by the regular occurrence in our lives of what Peter called “painful trial” (1 Peter 4:12)?

How do the psalms of lament in Scripture help us to find a biblical middle ground between denying we are angry with the evil of this world (and God’s handling of it!) on the one hand and acting as if doubt and anger with God were something good and wholesome on the other hand?

Why is it so much easier to lead crusades (ancient or modern) against evil real or perceived “out there” in the world rather than deal with the fact that the real frontline in this war is our own hearts?

Which do you think is the greater danger for us in this spiritual war, overestimating Satan’s fighting strength or underestimating it? Explain your answer.

In the midst of this daily warfare, what can help us remember more regularly that “we are on the side of the victors, not the defeated” (11)?

As you consider this whole series of essays (and the accompanying resource packet), be prepared to share with your brothers the ways you are planning to strengthen your practice of devotional time in Word and prayer.