

Thanks for Troubles and Trials

Throughout the year the last thing we want are troubles and trials, but especially at Christmas. Perhaps though we should give thanks for distress. I use for my daily devotions a resource (see the reference below) that has a short verse from the Psalms each day with excerpts from Martin Luther's commentaries on that verse. Recently this was the Psalm quotation:

Out of my distress I called on the Lord;
the Lord answered me and set me free. (Psalm 118:5)

Here is a portion of Luther's commentary on the verse:

Note the great art and wisdom of faith. It does not run to and fro in the face of trouble. It does not cry on everybody's shoulder, nor does it curse and scold its enemies. It does not murmur against God by asking: "Why does God do this to me? Why not to others, who are worse than I am?" Faith does not despair of the God who sends trouble. Faith does not consider Him angry or an enemy, as the flesh, the world, and the devil strongly suggest. Faith rises above all this and sees God's fatherly heart behind His unfriendly exterior. . . .

Faith as Luther describes it is not wimpy. It is robust, especially in times of trouble. Note too, Luther would have no patience with the current cultural trend to encourage people to believe they are victims.

Luther does not offer any apologies for God. He does not let God off the hook for our troubles. Instead he says God "sends trouble." Here is Luther's explanation for why God sends trouble:

Let everyone know most assuredly and not doubt that God does not send him this distress to destroy him, as we shall see in verse eighteen ["The Lord has disciplined me severely, but he has not given me over to death." Ps 118:18] He wants to drive him to pray, to implore, to fight, to exercise his faith, to learn another aspect of God's person than before, to accustom himself to do battle even with the devil and with sin, and by the grace of God to be victorious.

God sends distress and trouble so we turn to Him in prayer, trust Him, and get to know Him better. Luther states unequivocally how important it is that God sends trouble and trials:

Without this experience we could never learn the meaning of faith, the Word, Spirit, grace, sin, death, or the devil. Were there only peace and no trials, we would never learn to know God Himself. In short, we could never be or remain true Christians.

As much as we do not want to hear this about God and our relationship with Him, I think we have to admit Luther is correct. We only get to know God in trouble and trials. Yes, "let there be peace on earth," but not so much we do not know our Heavenly Father. Instead of saying, "Woe is me," in our trials, let us look forward to seeing how God draws us evermore closer to Him so that we are victorious over the devil and sin.

Quotes above from *Psalm by Psalm: 365 Devotional Readings with Martin Luther*, Concordia Publishing House, 2107, which uses Commentary on Psalm 18, Luther's Works 14:59-60.