

LUTHER'S WORKS

VOLUME 14 SELECTED PSALMS III

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CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS

The Library of Congress has catalogued this book as follows:

Luther, Martin, 1483–1546.

Works. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. Saint Louis, Concordia Pub. House [1955- v. 1, 1958]
v. 24 cm.

Vols. 31- edited by Harold J. Grimm [and others] General editor: Helmut T. Lehmann.

Vols. 31- have imprint: Philadelphia, Muhlenberg Press.

1. Theology—Collected works—16th cent. 2. Lutheran Church—Collected works. I. Pelikan,
Jaroslav, 1923- ed. II. Lehmann, Helmut T., ed.

BR330.E5 1955 208.1 55–9893 rev 2

Library of Congress

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St. Louis, Missouri

INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 14

THROUGHOUT his career Luther paid very much attention to the Psalter, as this volume and its predecessors show. His attention to it was personal, devotional, political, exegetical, polemical—all at the same time. Each of these motifs appears somewhere in the commentaries collected here. What unifies the commentaries is the way each of them succeeds in blending Luther’s personality with the message of the sacred text.

Two of the commentaries appearing in this volume were the outgrowth, directly or indirectly, of Luther’s earliest lectures on the Psalter of 1513–16 (see Volumes 10–11). The impact of those lectures both upon Luther himself and upon his audience prompted him to undertake a second exposition of the psalms. It is difficult to determine from the existing sources just when Luther began these second lectures, but it was probably in the latter half of 1518. From these *Works on the Psalms* we have taken the expositions of Psalms 1 and 2 (Weimar, V, 26–74; St. Louis, IV, 206–301). Both of these were in the first installment of five psalms published in 1519, perhaps in March, and accompanied by Luther’s dedication to the elector, which was dated March 27, 1519.

An even earlier outgrowth of the first lectures on the psalms, though an indirect one, was Luther’s work on *The Seven Penitential Psalms* of 1517, somewhat revised in 1525; we present here a translation of the edition of 1525 (Weimar, XVIII, 479–530; St. Louis, IV, 1658–1743). The grouping of these seven psalms as “penitential” seems to have been an early custom in the church; they came to be recited after the hour of Lauds on the Fridays in Lent. Although Luther broke with the penitential system of the medieval church, as the commentary indicates in several passages, he retained the use of these psalms as an expression of Christian repentance. It is of some importance to note that this exposition of the penitential psalms in its original edition of 1517 was the first book which Luther himself prepared for publication. He intended it, he said, “not for Nurembergers, that is, cultured and smart people, but for coarse Saxons, for whom Christian instruction cannot be chewed and prechewed enough even by my wordiness.” As we shall see later in this Introduction, Luther had occasion to lament his wordiness again in connection with other commentaries.

The occasion for the composition of Luther’s commentary on *Four Psalms of Comfort* (Weimar, XIX, 552–615; St. Louis, V, 1–75) was altogether different. It had come to Luther’s attention—presumably through the king and queen of Denmark, who may be the “pious people” referred to in the preface—that Queen Mary of Hungary was favorably inclined to the cause of the Reformation. As one historian has summarized her attitude: “Mary leaned toward the gentle but feeble and quietistic mediating theology of Erasmus, which had unusually wide support; she liked its appeal to the Bible. In passing she also granted Luther a few friendly glances. But her supreme Law and Gospel remained politics, the weal and woe of the House of Hapsburg.” The husband of Queen Mary, King Louis II of Hungary, was an enemy of the Reformation. When he died by drowning after being routed by the Turks at the Battle of Mohacs late in August of 1526, Luther addressed this commentary to the queen. He had actually been working on it long before he received the news of the king’s death. On April 20, 1526, we find him writing: “The psalms are not finished yet, because I have too much to do. Saying and doing are not the same.” But by autumn of the year they were finished, and the dedicatory epistle is dated November 1, 1526.

Two of the commentaries incorporated in this volume, those on Psalm 117 and Psalm 118, were composed in the summer of 1530, while the cause of the Reformation was struggling for its life at the Diet of Augsburg and Luther was standing by virtually helpless “in the desert” at Coburg Castle. The *Commentary on Psalm 118* (Weimar, XXXI-1, 65–182; St. Louis, V, 1178–1251) is the earlier of the two. The psalm *Confitemini*, Psalm 118, was Luther’s favorite among all the psalms. In 1529 he composed some scholia, or notes, on Psalm 118 and sent them to the neoclassical poet Eoban Hess, suggesting that Hess compose a metric Latin version of the psalm. “This psalm,” he wrote to Hess, “has often been an outstanding remedy for me against the plots and wiles of the devil. This is why I love it so and want to see it enriched and adorned in every language and with every possible device and figure of speech.” Hess complied with Luther’s request: in February 1530 Hess’s poetic version of Psalm 118 was published, together with Luther’s scholia. Luther was immensely pleased with Hess’s work, writing him that he read the poem over every day. Meanwhile Luther had been working on the translation of the Old Testament and was contemplating the composition of commentaries on several psalms for the lay public,

as we learn from a letter which he wrote in May of 1530. On June 13, 1530, Veit Dietrich tells us, Luther interrupted his other work on the Old Testament and began this commentary on Psalm 118. On June 26, 1530 (the day after the presentation of the Augsburg Confession), he resumed his other chores of writing and translating. The next day he wrote to Wenzeslaus Link that “the psalm *Confitemini* is on its way to Wittenberg, expounded and expanded with such a wordy commentary that I am displeased.” On June 30 he wrote to John Brenz, again complaining about his wordiness. Although the manuscript did not appear in print as soon as Luther had hoped—he wrote to Melanchthon on July 5 that he was already expecting the book to arrive—it was published later in 1530.

The *Commentary on Psalm 117* (Weimar, XXXI-1, 223–257; St. Louis, 1132–1173) also ran into difficulty with publishers; it also was composed at the Coburg; it also provided Luther with an opportunity to apologize for his wordiness—a wordiness all the more conspicuous by contrast with the brevity of the psalm itself. Laying aside his task of translating the prophets, he decided to “try out my wordiness on Psalm 117, *Laudate Dominum, omnes gentes*, ” as he wrote to Justus Jonas on August 3, 1530. The commentary was published right there at the Coburg; but, as Luther indicates in the preface (see p. 4), he decided to revise and expand the commentary before having it issued by another printer. The printer he chose was Hans Weisz. When Weisz delayed and demurred, Luther wrote to his wife under date of September 8, 1530, asking that the manuscript be turned over to the printer George Rhaw. From the correspondence of George Römer we know that by the middle of October the book had appeared. It was dedicated to an interesting man, Hans von Sternberg. In 1528–29 he had been chairman of the commission which conducted the visitation and investigation of the churches in Franconia, and later he supervised the sequestration of the Franconian monasteries and the orderly transfer of their extensive holdings to secular administration. He had once been on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and, if we are to believe the reports, was a great raconteur whose company Luther enjoyed very much.

Another such man of action whose company Luther enjoyed was Hans Löser, to whom he dedicated his *Commentary on Psalm 147* (Weimar, XXXI-1, 430–456; St. Louis, V, 1302–1333). Luther had previously dedicated to Löser his *Commentary on First Corinthians 7* in refutation of clerical celibacy. The present commentary was a “bread and butter gift” from Luther to Löser in gratitude for the latter’s hospitality. Luther had been Löser’s guest on a hunting trip. Since he could never find any enjoyment in hunting, which he called a “sweet-sour” sport, he began to expound Psalm 147:12–20 instead. In the Vulgate these verses formed a separate psalm, numbered as Psalm 147 (cf. Luther’s Works, 13, Introduction, p. ix). The commentary was finished in December of 1531 and appeared in January of 1532. A year later, on January 29, 1533, Luther asked Löser to stand as godfather for his son Paul, who had been born that very night. He wanted the baptism to take place at vespers the next day, “so that he does not remain a heathen any longer.” The relation between the two men apparently continued cordial until Löser’s death in 1541.

Thus the commentaries on the psalms in this and in the preceding volumes form a major part of Luther’s literary output and of his career as a theologian. They span more than two decades of his work and help to explain why he loved the Psalter more than the other books in the Bible, and why he regarded it as unique among them (see p. 286).

J. P.

PSALM • 117

Translated by
EDWARD SITTLER

1. *Praise the Lord, all you heathen! Extol Him, all you peoples!*
2. *For His steadfast love and faithfulness toward us prevails forever. Hallelujah!*

PREFACE

To the worshipful and honorable Hans von Sternberg, Knight, my gracious lord and friend.¹

GRACE and peace in Christ our Lord!

Your Worship and Honor, gracious lord and friend:

Not long ago I published a booklet on Ps. 117. But since it was hastily done and developed without deliberation, in fact, sent out quite bald and naked, I have thrust it back into the forge and improved it, though not much, that it might be more properly dressed, more pleasing, and more productive. The Scriptures surely deserve all we can do to honor and adorn them, that they might gain friends; for they already have enemies and persecutors in abundance.

I wanted to circulate this under your name, not only to give it respect among those who despise all art and teaching but also to have it prove that there are still some fine people among the nobility. For most of the nobility are behaving at present in such a sacrilegious and scandalous fashion that they have created bad blood among the common people and the suspicion that the whole nobility is worthless. But such a suspicion among the common people is dangerous, and it is not good that those who should rule in this world are discredited and disrespected. Some future confusion could result, as the devil finds time and opportunity, such as he found in the uprising under Münzer.²

We still have before us the example of the clergy, who were so smug and lived so scandalously that the whole world came to despise them, even though they thought it was impossible for them to be so despised and humbled. But it happened, and it is to be feared that they will never again attain the honor they once had. The nobility are trying hard to do likewise, and I am deeply concerned that they will be just as successful and fall heir to the same fate as the clergy if things go on as they are. For God did not lie when He said: "Those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed" (1 Sam. 2:30). The nobles think that because they are getting away with it, there is no emergency. They defy both God and man; they despise God's Word, laws, and honor. But just as God suddenly caught up with the clergy, so He will certainly catch up with the nobility. He is big enough, and He will give them such a beating and pounding that they will vanish like ashes in the wind.

If they want to be feared and respected, then certainly they should fear and respect God and gain a reputation for virtue among the people. If, however, they want to bluff their way through with vanity, pride, and defiance, and at the same time despise virtue and honor, this will soon make peasants out of the nobility. For they are actually peasants; only they parade as long as possible in the feathers and under the name of the nobility. But God is a master at humbling the proud and causing the despiser to be despised, and He will not put up with them.

Now in order to keep this evil suspicion from spreading too far, it is necessary to sing the praises of those among the nobility who certainly deserve it. God always takes care that in an estate which He Himself has ordained there are some devout and honest individuals, no matter how few, so that His creation and order are not wasted even if there is only one Lot in all Sodom. What estate on earth is so good that its major part is not bad? Thus when one looks at them individually, one gets the idea that the whole class is worthless. Even if one can come up with a few pious souls, still it is provoking that one has to put up with so many evil and wicked members for the sake of the few good ones.

Therefore because God the Father in heaven has endowed you with true earnestness and love for His holy Word and all virtue, I did not want to neglect praising this grace of God in you (for it is God's grace and not your own ability), so that perhaps some of the ill-mannered and undisciplined nobles might be moved by your example to strive toward noble behavior and not that of peasants or pigs. As long as they want to be on top in the world, it is their obligation to give an honest and virtuous example to those beneath them. God demands this of them, and He will repay them for any evil that results from their offensive and scandalous life.

If I do not achieve this by my efforts, well, at least I shall have helped to correct that destructive suspicion and to show that neither the nobility nor any other estate is thoroughly useless, but that God has His share among them and gets His percentage.

But I want this and similar booklets to please you; and I hope that in them your heart will find a better and holier pilgrimage than, say, the one you made to Jerusalem.³ It is not that I look down on such pilgrimages, for I should like to make some of these trips myself; and now that I no longer can, I like to read about them, just as I listened to your account recently with such pleasure and attention. But we have not made such pilgrimages in the proper spirit. When I made my pilgrimage to Rome, I was such a fanatical saint that I dashed through all the churches and crypts, believing all the stinking forgeries of those places. I ran through about a dozen Masses in Rome and was almost prostrated by the thought that my mother and father were still alive, because I should gladly have redeemed them from purgatory with my Masses and other excellent works and prayers. There is a saying in Rome: “Blessed is the mother whose son reads a Mass on Saturday in St. John’s!” How I should have liked to make my mother blessed! But it was too crowded, and I could not get in; so I ate a smoked herring instead.⁴

Well, that is what we did. We did not know any better, and the Holy See did not punish such gross lies. But now, thank God, we have the Gospels, psalms, and other Holy Scriptures, in which we may make pilgrimages with profit and blessing. Now we can behold and visit the true Promised Land, the true Jerusalem, yes, the true Paradise and kingdom of heaven, making our way, not through tombs and the physical places of the saints but rather through their hearts, thoughts, and spirits. With this I commend you and all yours to God. Forgive me my wordiness; for it is a joy to see and listen to godly nobility, since the hue and cry of the other kind is so overwhelming. God help us alii Amen. Out of the Wilderness, Yours obediently, Saturday after St. Bartholomew’s, 1530.⁵

MARTIN LUTHER

THIS is a short, easy psalm, doubtless made this way so that everyone might pay more attention to it and remember better what is said. No one can complain about the length or content, much less about the sharpness, difficulty, or profundity of the words. Here we find only short, precise, clear, and ordinary words, which everyone can understand if he will only pay attention and think about them. All God’s words demand this. We must not skim over them and imagine we have thoroughly understood them, like the frivolous, smug, and bored souls who, when they hear some word of God once, consider it old hat and cast about for something new. They think they have thoroughly mastered all they have heard. This is a dangerous disease, a clever and malicious trick of the devil. Thus he makes people bold, smug, forward, and ready for every kind of error and schism. This is really the vice known as ἀκηδία, slothfulness in God’s service, against which St. Paul exhorts us (Rom. 12:11) to be fervent in spirit. And in Rev. 3:15–16 the Spirit says of such people: “Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth.” It is true that such half-educated people are the most useless people on earth, and it would be better for them if they knew nothing; for they obey no one, can do everything better than anyone else, and can expertly judge all art and literature. In short, they can teach no one anything worthwhile, and they let no one teach them. They have devoured the whole schoolbag, which no one can master; and yet they do not have even one book that they could properly teach to others! The devil has many such vicious cases, particularly among the rabble. The meanest bungler who hears a sermon or reads a chapter in German immediately makes himself a doctor of theology, crowning his own asininity⁶ and convincing himself most marvelously that he can now do everything better than all his teachers. This is Master Smart Aleck, who can bridle a steed in its hind end.⁷ All this, as I see it, is the result of reading and listening to God’s Word carelessly instead of concentrating on it with fear, humility, and diligence.

I have often felt this particular devil and temptation myself, and even today I cannot guard and cross⁸ myself against it too carefully. I confess this freely as an example to anyone; for here am I, an old doctor of theology and a preacher, and certainly as competent in Scripture as such smart alecks. At least I ought to be. Yet even I must become a child; and early each day I recite aloud to myself the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and whatever lovely psalms and verses I may choose, just as we teach and train children to do. Besides, I must deal with Scripture and fight with the devil every day. I dare not say in my heart: “The Lord’s Prayer is worn out; you know the Ten Commandments; you can recite the

Creed.” I study them daily and remain a pupil of the Catechism. I feel, too, that this helps me a lot, and I am convinced by experience that God’s Word can never be entirely mastered, but that Ps. 147 speaks truly: “His understanding is beyond measure” (v. 5), or Ecclesiasticus: “Who drinks of me shall thirst even more after me” (24:29). Now if I have such difficulties, what will happen to those smug, self-satisfied charlatans who neither struggle nor labor?

Therefore I certainly believe that there is not one who truly knows everything the Holy Spirit says in this short psalm. If they were forced to teach or instruct someone from it, they would not know at which end to begin. To put these vicious people to shame and to honor God’s Word, I have taken it upon myself to interpret this psalm, so that one may see how clear God’s Word is, how simple, and yet how altogether inexhaustible. And even though everything were reasonable, which is not the case, still it is inexhaustible in power and virtue. It renews and refreshes the heart, restoring, relieving, comforting, and strengthening us constantly. I see and learn daily how the dear prophets studied their Ten Commandments, and where lies the source of their sermons and prophecies. Let us, then, divide this psalm into four parts—prophecy, revelation, instruction, and exhortation.

THE PROPHECY

With a few short words the psalmist prophesies and proclaims the great work and wonder of God, namely, the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ, which was foretold but not yet revealed at that time, and he says: “Praise the Lord, all heathen!” This is the same as saying that God is not only the God of the Jews but the God of the heathen also, and not only of a small part of heathendom but of all heathen throughout the world. For to speak of “all heathen” is to exclude none. Thus we heathen are assured that we, too, belong to God and in heaven, and that we shall not be damned, even though we are not of Abraham’s flesh and blood, as the Jews boast. As though only they, because of their physical descent from Abraham and the holy patriarchs, kings, and prophets, were God’s children and heirs of heaven! To be sure, this distinction is theirs alone, of all men, that they are the children of such holy fathers. But the distinction of being God’s children and heirs of His kingdom of heaven is not theirs alone. This psalm sings and proclaims that we heathen also have the very same distinction.

Now if all heathen are to praise God, this assumes that He has become their God. If He is to be their God, then they must know Him, believe in Him, and give up all idolatry. One cannot praise God with an idolatrous mouth or an unbelieving heart. And if they are to believe, they must first hear His Word and thereby receive the Holy Spirit, who through faith purifies and enlightens their hearts. One cannot come to faith or lay hold on the Holy Spirit without hearing the Word first, as St. Paul has said (Rom. 10:14): “How are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard?” and (Gal. 3:2): “You have received the Spirit through the proclamation of faith.” If they are to hear His Word, then preachers must be sent to proclaim God’s Word to them; for not all the heathen can come to Jerusalem or make a living among the small company of the Jews. Therefore the psalmist does not say: “Come to Jerusalem, all heathen!” He lets them stay where they are and calls upon them, wherever they may be, to praise God.

I point this out because someone might want to give this psalm a specifically Jewish interpretation, as if all heathen had to come to Jerusalem and become Jews. Jerusalem would be much too small, even if it were as large as the whole kingdom of David and Solomon used to be. For heathendom and the world are far too large, entirely apart from the lack of any such meaning in the text. Thus we are faced with the fact that God sent His apostles and disciples to all heathen, had the Gospel preached, gave His Holy Spirit, redeemed them from sin, death, and the devil, purified their hearts through faith, and thus accepted them as children and heirs and as His own people. He did not summon them to Jerusalem or command them to become Jews. And there are enough other verses in Scripture which declare that God’s Word should go to the heathen while they remain where they are. Thus, for instance, Ps. 19:5: “Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.” In the same way the prophet Zephaniah prophesies that the heathen will remain heathen and still become God’s people. He says: “Yes, He will famish all the gods of the earth, and to Him shall bow down each in its place, all the islands of the heathen” (2:11). And there are many similar passages.

Now see what a commotion this little psalm causes throughout the world—how it storms and rages among idols! The world has always been full of idolatry, factions, and error, so that even the Romans, the cleverest and mightiest of all, had more than a hundred gods.⁹ The world is divided into countless errors, and yet this psalm dares include these thoughts and boldly declare that all such factions and

idolatries must cease, and that all the heathen must turn to one faith and praise and honor one God. Through the Word of God there is to come out of such a variety of worship one harmonious flock under one Shepherd (John 10:16). It is truly wonderful that a human heart can dare conceive of this, believe in it, and firmly prophesy that it will happen, especially when one considers how hard the devil will oppose, resist, and block it with all the power and wisdom of this world, so that it would seem to be a sheer impossibility. Nevertheless, the psalmist has the courage to say it, and in spite of all it has come to pass. Both are great miracles: that a man should believe this, and that it should actually happen.

From this we see that the Word of God must be an almighty power of God (Rom. 1:16). It has cleaned up the idolatry, sectarianism, and error that then prevailed in the world so thoroughly that not a shred remains, despite the fact that emperors, princes, wise men, saints, all devils, and the whole world raged with such stubborn violence against it. The world has never taken it upon itself to fight idolatry. It can put up with any amount of error. But when God's Word comes, the world goes mad and refuses to stand for it. The world has had to stand for it, however, and has even been thoroughly defeated. This is the greatest work God has done on earth, much greater than leading the Children of Israel out of Egypt, when only King Pharaoh and his followers were drowned in the Red Sea. But now the whole angry, perverse world has been drowned, and God's Word and Christendom survive. Let us praise such a work, and let us comfort ourselves with the conviction given us by this example, that God's Word will and must remain even though the devil and the world storm and rage against it ever so violently. The Word has done many wonders in the world, and it is not finished yet.

Then the heretics charged against the Word in great force, with might and craft. Where are they now? They are gone; but the Word remains, and the Christians are still here. In our own time the Turks, the Antichrist,¹⁰ and many sects are tilting against it; but they will gain no more than their predecessors. My advice is: When the Word confronts you, beware and yield. Give ground, and obey in good time; for it must conquer whether you bow gracefully or ungracefully, for we read (1 Peter 1:25): "The Word of the Lord abides forever." If you choose not to believe this, well, then learn it by experience. The Word has broken the power of this world, which protects idolatry; it has conquered the craft of this world, which defends heresy; it will surely defeat the wickedness of the world, which is now defending both idolatry and heresy. Nothing will prevail against it. This is our present comfort, and it appears that the Word is about to gain the upper hand and prevail; for many plots and schemes have been utterly foiled, and great power and rage have been frustrated.

Praise the Lord, all you heathen!

"Heathen," *גוֹיִם* in the Hebrew, is the name generally given by the Jews to all peoples that are not Jews, just as we also call all peoples "heathen" that are not Christians. But its proper meaning is "nation," or all the people of a given country, just as we Germans are a nation or *נֵיִל*, the Bohemians also, and the Hungarians, and the Poles, etc. Thus the Jewish people is often termed *גוֹיִם*, as in Ex. 19:6: "And you shall be to Me a holy nation"; or in Is. 1:4: "Ah, sinful nation," and in many other places. The Jews are certainly included in this verse when the psalmist says: "Let all *גוֹיִם* praise the Lord," that is to say, all nations, countries, peoples; all languages, kingdoms, and principalities, etc. Since we Germans have no specific word for this, I have stayed with the common usage, according to which *גוֹיִם* means heathen, because the meaning is clear. But the word "peoples," *עַמִּים*—where he says: "Extol Him, all peoples!"—I take to mean the plebs, that is to say, the people of any city, or what one calls a community.¹¹ The *גוֹיִם* are the people of a whole country under one king, prince, or lord; *עַמִּים*, however, are the people of any particular city or community.

I say this because the Antichrist and his followers believe that there are no Christians except under their tyranny. The Holy Spirit says: "All heathen, all people," and He would not lie. But all heathen have never been under one lord or bishop, nor will they ever be; for such dominion over all the heathen belongs only to Him of whom this psalm sings: "Praise the Lord, all heathen!" Other princes and kings will have to be satisfied with portions and will not become God's equals. Similarly, a man is not a heretic just because he is not subordinate to the pope. If it were a necessary article of faith that all the world should be under the pope, God would be a liar. Such an article of faith has never been established and fulfilled. Yet all the articles of faith must be established and fulfilled, since they are the Word and

promise of God; thus the article about the resurrection to come has already been fulfilled in some, particularly in Christ Himself. But that all the world should become subject to the pope has never come true or been fulfilled, not even for a single moment. If what Christ intended is that the pope was to rule over the whole world, then this article of faith would be disproved by just one individual who did not have a pope, even though all other men had popes. Therefore it cannot be an article of faith. If this could ever have been fulfilled, then it would surely have been in the time of St. Peter, whom they make the first pope, and who was the greatest; for Christ Himself spoke to him and promised and gave him the keys (Matt. 16:18–19). If Peter was to have had this distinction yet did not have it, then Christ did not keep His word, and no pope dare hope that it will happen to him. It is all a silly lie.

Now how can it be true that all the heathen will become subject to one Christ and praise God, when all heathen persecute Christ, as He Himself says in Matt. 5:11: “Men shall revile you for My sake”? The answer: The psalm does not say that all men, or even all those among the heathen, will praise Him, but “all you heathen.” That is to say: Wherever there are heathen—or a country or a city—there the Gospel will penetrate and will convert some to the kingdom of Christ. Regardless of whether all people believe it, still Christ rules wherever there are people: He preserves His Word, His Baptism and Sacrament, despite all devils and men. For the Gospel and Baptism must come to the whole world, as they have indeed come and every day come again. Thus He has said (Mark 16:15): “Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to the whole creation”; and (Ps. 19:1): “The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims His handiwork.” That is, Christ is preached as far as the heavens and the firmament extend.¹² Wherever one finds the Gospel, Baptism, and the Sacrament, there is His church, and in that place there are certainly living saints. There men praise Him, and He rules over them, even though they are but young people and children. Inevitably, however, there will be old people too.

You may say: “This is a small kingdom, to have so few Christians among the heathen!” Friend, this is not a small kingdom, nor is it an insignificant power. First of all, even for those few Christ must be in command, in order to have the devil, the world, death, life, and everything in His hand. Were this not true, the devil would not allow Christ’s Gospel or His Baptism to last for an hour, not even for a moment; and the world would not let a single Christian live even for an hour. The persistence of the Gospel, Baptism, and Christians demonstrates Christ’s almighty power over all devils and men among all heathen in all places, as Ps. 110:2 says: “Rule in the midst of Thy foes!” and Ps. 45:5: “Royal people will worship Thee in the midst of Thy enemies.” Secondly, He protects and preserves His Christians with this power, and, in addition, rules in a very special way, namely, with the Holy Spirit, redeeming them from sin, death, and damnation, and making them righteous, alive, and blessed. Therefore the fewer Christians and the more non-Christians and devils there are in any one place, the more mightily and powerfully Christ reigns in that very place. If He has little there to rule over, He has all the more to defend and protect. So much for the first point.

THE REVELATION

This psalm also reveals a peculiarly great mystery, one little known at the time of the apostles and almost faded away under the papacy, namely, that the kingdom of Christ is not a temporal, transitory, earthly kingdom, ruled with laws and regulations, but a spiritual, heavenly, and eternal kingdom that must be ruled without and above all laws, regulations, and outward means. He tells the heathen to remain heathen; He does not ask them (as I pointed out before¹³) to run away from their countries or cities to go to Jerusalem. He does not demand that they give up or abandon their secular laws, customs, and habits to become Jews, just as He does not demand of the Jews that they abandon their laws. What He demands is something different from, and higher than, external, worldly laws or ceremonies. Every country and city can observe or change its laws. He does not concern Himself about this. Where laws are retained, they do not hinder His kingdom; for He says: “Praise the Lord, all you heathen!” Heathen, however, as I have already said, are people in various countries and cities. Countries and cities cannot maintain themselves without laws, customs, and ordinances with which they govern, judge, punish, protect, and keep the peace. They may change these things on occasion, but they cannot get along without them.

Whenever we hear of heathen or kings in Scripture, we must not think only of persons with crowns but of their whole government, with laws, offices, ordinances, customs, usages, and habits by which their kingdoms are maintained and managed. What kind of kings or lords would they be otherwise?

Plaster kings¹⁴ and painted lords! We read in Ps. 72:10: “May the kings from the seashore and from the isles render Him tribute.” With such expressions the Holy Spirit confirms the secular laws and government of all countries and calls them “kings,” giving us to understand that they are to retain their authority, and that everyone is to be obedient and subject to his lord and master. He does not rebuke them for being kings or heathen or nations. He Himself created and established them, and divided up the world for them to rule, as Paul also testifies in Acts 17:26. If He wanted to upbraid or scold them, He would certainly not call them kings, heathen, or nations; in that case He would address them in a different way. Since He does name and confirm them as kings and heathen, we should all the more let them be kings and heathen—that is, nations or worldly authority—and honor them as such.

At the same time He confirms all crafts, classes, and trades existing under such secular governments, regardless of name, insofar as they are honest and praiseworthy according to their own law. They may be citizens, farmers, shoemakers, tailors, clerks, knights, masters, servants, etc.; for without such, as Ecclesiasticus says, no city or country could exist (38:36). One must recognize that in themselves such occupations are not contrary to God; and if one wants to serve God, one should not turn up one’s nose at them and creep away into a monastery or set up some other sect. Yes, these are all estates established by God to serve Him according to the words of Gen. 3:19: “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.” This is the way He intended it to be. What He demands of countries and peoples in this psalm is something entirely different. He does not say: “Go about your work, all you heathen”; for this is already commanded in Gen. 3:19, as we have heard. It is not enough for Him that you become a Carthusian monk, a nun, or a priest. To Him that is lower than the lowliest manual labor on earth. He rejects and damns these self-chosen orders which flee, avoid, and despise the sweating (ordained for all men in Gen. 3:19), as though they could invent a finer service to God than God Himself has established in the sweating of our faces. The cunning, rascally power of reason always wants to master God and seek its own advantage with Him.

What is it, then, that He demands? It is the praise of the Lord. Oh, this is a great demand and, as this world understands and interprets it, a most unbearable and insufferable levy and tax on mankind! Then this psalm becomes a heresy and the most poisonous preachment ever proclaimed on earth, for what does it mean to praise the Lord? It means to deny all other gods, to give up serving all other gods, to damn all our own holiness, wisdom, and achievement. No country or people, no king or master, can tolerate this, to damn their own gods and holy works and cast out their own wisdom and holiness. “My friend,” they say, “this teaching aims to take our gods away from us (as Demetrius complains in Acts 19:26)!¹⁵ Our religious services are to amount to nothing, and our fathers and we are to be taken for fools! Our habits, customs, and traditions are to be considered wrong! These villains are revolutionaries and blasphemers. They want to make us a new god and teach us a new faith! To the stake with them, to the gallows, to the hangman with these villains!”

Here the words of the second psalm apply: “Why do the heathen conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? Why do the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and His Anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst Their bonds asunder, and cast Their cords from us!’ ” (Ps. 2:1–3). It truly astonishes us and raises the question why they should rage so against the Lord, whom they really ought to praise, and why they curse His kingdom and dominion as bonds and cords, as if they were His prisoners. He does them no harm, robs them of nothing. He calls them kings, nations, and people; He lets them remain kings, countries, and people, and retain all that they have. He desires only to be their God, and this certainly does them no harm. Instead, it brings them all good things, both temporal and eternal (as we read in verse two), helps them out of the toils of the devil, and frees them from the bonds of death and sin. He wants nothing except what is justly His; and He demands what is His own, namely, His divinity, that He may be God, and that He may give them what is most necessary and useful, namely, their own life and salvation.

But this is how it is: The Word is seen as a rope and a chain, a code of unbearable restrictions, heresy and the doctrine of demons (1 Tim. 4:1), sedition, dissent, and disturbance, a novel god and a novel faith. And all the violence and raging which they begin is blamed on the teaching of God. They claim to be the children, fathers, masters, and friends of peace, though they are insane with murder, arson, and persecution. Yet the gracious Word lets them remain and sees them as kings, princes, lords, nations, and people; and it teaches peace with all vigor. Thus the world shows that it is the devil’s own

—blind, possessed, crazed, and foolish—to persecute the God who gives, allows, and preserves temporal peace and all good things, and, even beyond this, directs us to eternal peace, heavenly goods, and unending, blessed life. For this He is blasphemed as a heretic and a disturber of the peace, and He must bear the blame for the madness that man commits and perpetrates. Whoever has not read or heard about such things in the times of the apostles, martyrs, and heretics, let him now observe and comprehend it in our own times in the case of our sophists¹⁶ and papists. They are deprived of nothing, but everything they have is established by this teaching. They are asked only to praise the Lord, to forsake their old idolatry, and to change their unchristian worship, in order that they may have peace and life in this world and in the next. But everybody sees their attitude toward this; no further discussion is needed here.

And even today this is what hinders and prevents the Jews from becoming Christians; they cannot bear to see the heathen called God's people while still remaining heathen. They think one should be circumcised and obey their ancient Mosaic Law. They neither hear nor see that in this psalm and in many other places God calls the heathen to praise Him and yet lets them remain heathen, or nations, according to their outward organization and laws. Thus He most impressively annuls the Law of Moses as not necessary in order to praise God or become His people. He calls upon the heathen to praise God, even though they are uncircumcised and live without the Law of Moses according to their own law. They could not praise God without first becoming God's people through His Word, as I have said above.

It is not as though here God were despising or damning the Law of Moses as sin or error in itself. But He demands something higher than a life according to the Law of Moses, something different, namely, that one should praise the Lord among all the heathen. Where they will not do this, all their being and doing according to the Law of Moses is lost, damned, and sinful. In the same way Paul invariably permitted the Jews to circumcise themselves and keep the Law of Moses, provided only that beyond all this they believed in Christ and held faith alone necessary for salvation, even without the Law. Paul also let the heathen retain their laws and customs if they but believed in this same Christ and held faith alone essential to salvation, even without their laws and customs, as he says in 1 Cor. 7:19: "For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God"; or again (Rom. 3:20): "For no human being will be justified in His sight by works of the Law"; and again (Gal. 6:15): "For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation"; and in 1 Cor. 7:18: "Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of his circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision."

"Yes," they say, "we praise the Lord in the Law of Moses; therefore we are certainly His people." Answer: But they do not praise that Lord who wants to be praised by all heathen and is so praised, for they do not want to believe that the heathen may praise God without the Law of Moses. Therefore the Jews do not hold God to be that Lord who is praised among *all* the heathen, as we are told in this psalm and indeed throughout Scripture. For if what this psalm says is true, then God must really be God among all the heathen, despite the fact that they remain heathen and outside the Law of Moses. But where has there ever been a god whom all the heathen praise, except our God, whom we Christians honor and praise? And where is any god whose word has sounded so far out into all the world and, despite the incessant opposition of kings and princes, has been so vigorously accepted and maintained as the Gospel of Christ? How can a god ever come whom all heathen are to praise, if they have to become Jews and cannot remain heathen, as this psalm prophesies? If all heathen are to praise God and still be called and remain heathen, without having to become Jews, then it is certain that the Law of Moses is not necessary in order to praise God or become His people. Therefore it is also certain that the Law of Moses is at an end and has been annulled, since the prophecy of this psalm has been fulfilled, namely, that all heathen shall praise God and become God's people without the Law or circumcision. It is the Jews who must become heathen. That is, they must believe that the God whom all heathen praise is their own true God and the God of all their fathers and prophets; He tells them in this psalm that He must become the God, not of the Jews alone but of all the heathen. If they do not do this, then they deny their own God and do not believe His Word, which here declares that He wills to be the God of all the heathen.

God Himself promised this to Abraham before He gave him circumcision, and long before the time of Moses, when He said to him: "No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be

Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:5). Here God declares plainly that Abraham is not to be the father of only one nation but of many nations, or heathen. It is also clear that the Jews are only a single *יִשְׂרָאֵל*, not many *יִשְׂרָאֵלִים*. If Scripture is true, then Abraham’s God must be the God of many heathen, not only of the Jews. The heathen would no longer be heathen if they all had to become a Jewish people. Therefore the Law of Moses is no longer necessary once that God has come whom all heathen are to praise and take as their God. If, beyond this, they also want to circumcise themselves and keep the Law of Moses, God will not question this, provided that they do not make it a requirement for remaining God’s people. For where they do require it, they are saying that the heathen may not be God’s people, and that God cannot be the God of the heathen without the Law of Moses. This is the same as saying that God lies and deceives us in this and similar psalms.

How could the idea arise that all heathen peoples would have to keep the Law of Moses if they wanted to be God’s people? It was not true in ancient times, when Jerusalem and the Jews and Moses were at the peak of their power, before God even went out among the heathen. For the prophet Jonah testifies abundantly that the city of Nineveh was called the city of God and had the true God of the Jews; and still the people were heathen and remained uncircumcised, and lived according to their own law without the Law of Moses. Lot and Job were also God’s servants, without benefit of circumcision or the Law of Moses; similarly King Pharaoh of Egypt and his people, at the time of Joseph; also Prince Naaman of Syria, at the time of Elisha; or the widow of Zarephath, at the time of Elijah; and many more who all knew and praised the true God of Abraham and still did not become Jews.¹⁷ It is palpable blindness, therefore, to hope to make all the heathen into Jews at the time of the Messiah; for before then this was not necessary for any heathen to become God’s people. It is enough that one praise God, the psalm says; that is, acknowledge, believe, praise, and give thanks. These things make God’s people.

I have said this not only against the errors of the Jews but much more against certain misguided spirits who want to impose on us heathen the Law of Moses, which God has taken away even from the Jews.¹⁸ These spirits prate away with the purpose of arranging temporal and spiritual institutions accordingly, of confusing consciences and changing secular laws, just as if the Gospel taught nothing higher than worldly laws or outward custom. It is certainly true that in the Mosaic Law secular government and outward custom are more finely framed than in all the laws and customs of heathendom, and it would be well if the whole world had more of such laws. But since this is not necessary, and since such a change could not be effected without unbearable dangers and damage, then let it be our one wish that each country keep its own laws, habits, and customs, as the saying goes: “Many lands, many customs.” Keep your conscience free and objective toward the Mosaic Law, and know that God demands of the heathen nothing but that He be praised and honored as the Gospel has proclaimed Him to the entire world. And be obedient to all that He teaches and commands in the Gospel. Then you will be His people and, together with all heathen and Jews in one faith and service, you will praise the one true Lord.

Yes, it is well and good that God dealt with Jerusalem as He did, abolishing the government of the Jews and annulling the Law of Moses, so destroying them that they will never rise again. For if they are so stubborn that they will not accept the God of the heathen, who is also their own God, and for this very reason have been so terribly tormented and leveled to the ground, what would they do if they still had all their authority, Law, and Jerusalem? To tyrants such things are a terrible example of God’s wrath in these matters, and to believers throughout the world they are a comfort. I call this terrible because if God did not want to spare Jerusalem, the finest city there ever was on earth, His most beloved, His own house and dwelling and holy of holies, within the walls of which lie the greatest saints and prophets; and if He did not take into Consideration the most perfect Law and government on earth, which He Himself established; if He ignored the fact that the Jews were His own people and the heirs of the holy patriarchs and their flesh and blood but tore all this to shreds and scattered it because they would not acknowledge this Lord of all heathen as their God—then why should He spare other kings, countries, and peoples among the heathen, who also refuse to accept this Lord?

In our own day the same thing should happen to the monasteries and convents. They should be torn down and destroyed; and this has already begun, no matter how fine, beautiful, and useful they may appear.¹⁹ They, too, blaspheme this Lord of all heathen, whom they should praise. Instead of accepting Him, they magnify their own work and organization to such a degree that they not only want to be

Christians and gain salvation but want to be above and better than ordinary Christians. Besides, they do business with the works and virtues of other Christians and presume to use them to help gain heaven. All this is an unspeakable abomination! What else is this but saying by means of actions: “Compared with us, a simple, ordinary Christian is nothing. The status of a Christian is far below ours. By Baptism no one can rise to the level we achieve with our tonsures and cowls. A Christian would never be saved without the help of our estate”?

What is all this but saying: “Baptism is nothing, the blood of Christ is nothing, Christ’s death and resurrection are nothing, God’s Word is nothing, God Himself is nothing; we, we are more and better than Baptism, Christ, and God”? If they really valued themselves less than God, they would value themselves less than Christ and His blood. If they valued themselves less than Christ’s blood, they would value themselves less than Baptism, which is sanctified through Christ’s blood and baptizes with Christ’s blood. If they valued themselves less than Baptism, they would value themselves less than the ordinary Christians, and their own estate lower than that of ordinary Christians. But if they were to value their own estate less than that of ordinary Christians, then where would they be? If they are to remain in their present pomp and pride, they must make themselves into something higher, better, and holier than ordinary Christians. That is to say, they must consider themselves above the whole Christian Church or all Christendom, higher than Baptism, higher than Christ’s blood, higher than the Holy Spirit and God Himself. This is truly to praise oneself and to blaspheme the Lord of all heathen. Nobody can deny that they have done just that and have exalted their own estate above that of the ordinary Christian. There are letters and books and acts enough to convince anyone.

But if they considered and used their foundations and monasteries as places where Christian youth should be trained and faith and discipline are taught, that we might have fine persons for Christian service, and thus the foundations and monasteries were nothing else than Christian schools, as they were originally founded—and if they called the prelates provost, deacon, scholar, cantor, and the like—then the foundations would be fine.²⁰ But to make of them an estate superior to the ordinary class of Christians, that is all wrong; it denies and curses Christ. They should serve and promote the Christian estate, as do the schools, home training, secular government, and the rest of creation; but they should not be better or higher than the common order of Christians. The estate of the Christian should hover above all things like heaven above earth, for it is the status of Christ Himself and God’s own work. Because they do not want to do this, they will have to be torn to bits and scattered like stubborn Jerusalem; there is no help for it. This Lord of all heathen we must praise and let remain, lest everything go to wrack and ruin.

We are told in the second psalm that this Lord is to be King and God among all the heathen. Whoever refuses will be reduced to ruin, regardless of his size, might, intelligence, elegance, or holiness. All heathen are to praise this Lord. We have seen how He reduced to ashes the greatest of cities, Rome, the greatest empire on earth, ripping and smashing its mighty power so that hardly any pieces are left.²¹ For He has said: “Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (Ps. 2:9); or again: “Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish from the way” (Ps. 2:12). That is to say: “Look out. For if you do not worship the Son, there shall be no mercy, but only destruction. And both you and your way, your life, works, government, laws, ordinances, worship, etc., must perish and never rise again. He will tolerate no worship, government, holiness, cleverness, power, greatness, population, country, or people unless they praise the Lord, who is proclaimed King and God among all the heathen, just as this psalm says.” This is final! Whoever will not agree must learn by experience, as the Jews and Romans have had to learn it. This is a comfort and a certain hope of salvation to us who believe.

Let this be said about the revelation of this psalm. Even today it requires a great and lofty insight to understand that the substance of Christianity is a much nobler thing and altogether different from all secular and spiritual laws, outward holiness, government, and whatever other such things there may be among the Jews or heathen. St. Paul himself affirms in Eph. 3:5 that it came as a revelation even to the apostles that the heathen could be God’s people without the Law of Moses, yes, without and beyond all law. Thus we read in Acts 10 and 11 that St. Peter himself did not know until it was revealed to him in a vision from heaven when he was to go to Cornelius, the heathen. As I see it, the whole Book of Acts was written because of this psalm and similar passages, to demonstrate that the heathen are able to become

God's people without the Law of Moses. In Acts 15 we find a special assembly held in Jerusalem on this very question; and only Peter, Paul, and Barnabas stood for this point against the whole body of the faithful. So difficult it is for our reason and nature to comprehend that the secular and ecclesiastical estate are nothing when compared with the Christian estate! Our reason always wants to mix the two, making out of the Christian estate a worldly or ecclesiastical structure framed and governed by laws and works.²² And in the process it forgets and no longer knows what truly belongs to Christ and the Christian calling, as, unfortunately, we have seen demonstrated under the papacy.

It is called a revelation, and it remains a revelation; for you will find nothing about this in all the books of canon law or in all the pronouncements of all the popes—whether they are called Decretals, Sextes, Clementines, Extravagantes, or by any other term.²³ In all the compendia, maxims of the copyists, monks' sermons, regulations of the synods, formularies of monasteries and orders, rules of monks and nuns, all the statutes of councils, the whole of St. Jerome or St. Gregory, all the theses of theologians or lectures at the universities, all Masses and vigils, all ceremonies of all the churches, all foundations for souls, all the brotherhoods of all the sects, all pilgrimages to all places, all the worship of Mary and all the saints, all indulgences of all papal bulls, the whole chancellery of the pope, the entire court of the popes or of all the bishops—nowhere in all this, I say, will you find a trace of this truth, but rather only obstacles and perversion of this revelation.

What have the popes and bishops made of the Gospel and the Christian Church except a completely ecclesiastical, yes, even a worldly dominion? What else are all the new sectarian spirits, fanatics, and foolish saints trying to do but to turn the Gospel into outward holiness or a new monastic order of grey coats²⁴ and a long face? We are told: "Praise the Lord, all you heathen. Be heathen, remain heathen, become heathen. Establish ecclesiastical orders, set up rules and codes, make laws and secular government. Be chaste, marry, and devise whatever outward doings and forms you please. But take care that you do not think it possible to become Christians or be saved by such means. Do not imagine for a moment that such things are Christianity or of its essence. For such things as I have just enumerated can all be thought out and established by reason without the help of Christ. One thing must rise high above all that you can devise and do, namely, that you praise the Lord. The things just mentioned praise you yourselves, not the Lord. For these things are yours, developed by you in yourselves out of your mind and previously planted and established in nature."

THE INSTRUCTION

In this part the psalmist teaches us the greatest wisdom on earth, namely, the wisdom of faith. This wisdom is divine and not human, secret and not revealed, heavenly and not earthly; no man knows it, as Paul says, not even the princes of this world (1 Cor. 2:8). Therefore it will be a heresy to this world and be damned as a doctrine of the devil (1 Tim. 4:1). It is an insufferable truth that this psalm dares sing out: "God's steadfast love toward us prevails."²⁵ This is the reason why all the heathen should praise God, namely, because from God they receive grace, mercy, and all good things absolutely free, without any merit, works, or laws. In contrast, the Jews boast that they have God's Law and their own works, as St. Paul points out to the Romans (2:23). We also read in Ps. 147:19–20: "He declares His Word to Jacob, His statutes and ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any of the heathen; they do not know His ordinances."²⁶ It is true that until the time of Christ the Jews alone had the Law and the prophets, as St. Paul says in Rom. 3:2. But after Christ and in Christ all heathen have the Gospel, that is, the declaration of grace, of which this psalm speaks.

But there are unusually fine words in this verse, words which we should not skim over coldly or without feeling. In the first place, the psalmist speaks of "His steadfast love." This is not our doing, holiness, or wisdom; it is His grace and mercy. What, then, is the grace of God? It is this, that from sheer mercy, for the sake of Christ, who is our beloved Bishop and Mediator, God forgives all our sins. He abates all His anger, leads us by faith from idolatry and error to truth. And the Holy Spirit purifies our hearts, enlightens, sanctifies, and justifies us, chooses us as children, and heirs, adorns us with His gifts, redeems and protects us from the power of the devil, and finally gives us eternal life and blessedness. And yet He also supplies this transitory life with everything needful, gives and preserves it, through the service and co-operation of all creatures of heaven and earth. The whole world could not deserve even the tiniest of these gifts, much less all of them, or even some of the greater ones. In fact, because of its

idolatry, ingratitude, contempt, and continual manifold sinning it has deserved nothing but anger, death, and hell.

If this is true—and it undeniably is—then it follows that our works, wisdom, and holiness are nothing before God. For if it is God’s love, then it cannot be our merit. And if it is our merit, then it is not God’s love (Rom. 11:6).²⁷ This is why the Jews get nowhere with their Law and works, much less the heathen with their idolatries. The same thing is true of the sophists with the abomination of their Masses, institutions, monasteries, pilgrimages, and innumerable other human devices and works. Why do they all fight this teaching of God’s grace and call it heresy? Because they do not want to see their own teaching and works despised and discarded. That God’s grace gives us so much, as I said above, they are willing to accept; but that their own doings should be nothing and only pure and simple grace should count before God, why, that has to be heresy. They want to have a hand in the game and through free will do so much that they will earn God’s grace and buy it from Him, together with all the aforementioned goods. Then not the love of God but our own merit achieves grace. Then we are the workmen who lay the cornerstone on which God then builds His grace and love, so that He must praise, thank, and adore us. Then we become His gods instead of the other way around; as this psalm says, we must thank, praise, and worship Him, and He must be our God. Then we have initiated all good things and with our merit have laid a foundation for His grace.

These people babble this psalm with their mouths, but in their hearts they interpret and read it this way: “Let all the world praise us, and all people admire us; for our works prevail over them, and our views shall endure forever.” They cannot deny that this is their heartfelt interpretation. All the letters of their orders and brotherhoods are convincing; in them they assure, certify, promise, and sell—all very honestly and properly—the eternal purchase and possession of their meditations and Masses, and all their good works. And they share all this with the purchasers, both their forefathers and their descendants, so that by such means they are redeemed and saved from purgatory, even though they were never even baptized or had never been Christians. How does God’s grace come first here, to accomplish this with no works at all? Oh, then it must first be bought with the works of others! Is this not a blasphemous and monstrous exaltation of our own works in place of and above God’s grace? Nor do they repent of this and mend their ways, but they even want to conceal and prettify them. But their letters and seals, bulls and books, are too much in evidence; they testify too loudly against them, and they will not permit concealment or sugar-coating.

Now choose which of the three interpretations of this verse you prefer. The first is: Our works prevail over God’s grace toward us. The next is: Our works prevail without Christ but still alongside the grace of God toward us. The third is: God’s grace prevails over us without and instead of all works, through Christ. The first two are inventions spun from the brains of Jews, Turks, sophists, and all false Christians. The third is the meaning of the Holy Spirit and all true Christians. That the first two belong also to the sophists, so that in this they really are Jews and Turks, is not only proved by their letters and seals, bulls and books but is also demonstrated by their deeds. They still defend their doings; and in defense of them they murder, burn, and persecute in the most monstrous fashion. For if they were convinced of the third meaning, they would not only cease their persecutions but would change and improve their institutions, their monasteries, and their whole system. To date it has been the whole practice of this system to sell its own works to people in order to redeem them from their sins and expedite them to heaven. This is unchallenged, for I and all of us were ourselves once bogged down in this mess and helped to teach and do it! Praise God for rescuing us!

Secondly, the psalmist uses the word “prevail”; that is, God’s grace “rules” over us.²⁸ It is a kingdom of grace that is more powerful in and over us than all anger, sin, and evil. No sophist or believer in works has ever understood this word, nor can he understand it any better than a Jew and a Turk. As long as they want to present their works to obtain grace, they cannot possibly know what the kingdom of grace or the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of Christ means. In their hearts they think, as I also thought when I was a sophist: “If we do good, then we have grace; if we sin or fall or feel sin, grace falls too and is lost; and we must again seek and find it through our works.” They cannot think otherwise. But this implies, not a kingdom of grace that prevails over works but a kingdom of works that prevails over grace. But “prevail,” **יָבִיר** in Hebrew, means to be supreme, to be great. You must think of the kingdom of grace as a child might, in this way: God, through the Gospel, has set a new and great heaven over us

who believe, and this is called the heaven of grace. It is far, far more immense and beautiful than this visible heaven; and it is eternal, certain, and indestructible as well.

Now whoever is under this heaven cannot sin or be in sin; for it is the heaven of grace, infinite and eternal. And if someone should sin or fall, he would not fall out of this same heaven unless he did not want to remain under it but preferred to go to hell with the devil, as unbelievers do. Although sin makes itself felt, death bares its teeth, and the devil frightens us, still there is far more grace to prevail over all sin, far more life to prevail over death, and far more God to prevail over all devils. In this kingdom sin, death, and the devil are nothing more than the black clouds of the material heaven. For a time they may well conceal heaven, but they cannot prevail. They must stay beneath the heavens and suffer it to remain, prevail, and rule over them; and at last they must pass away. Therefore although sin bites us, death frightens us, and the devil throws his weight around with temptation, these are still only clouds. The heaven of grace prevails and rules; in the end they must remain below and surrender. This cannot come through works, but only through the faith which is certain that such a heaven of grace is above it, without works, and which looks to this heaven as often as it sins or feels sin, comforting itself without merit or works.

Whoever wants to drown out sin and death with works will, of necessity, fail; for it is impossible to recognize all sins (Ps. 19:12).²⁹ Only the lesser part of sin is recognizable, and the devil or God's judgment will reveal those sins that man cannot recognize or know. Then the conscience will be terrified and say: "O Lord God, I have done nothing to atone for this sin!" For it thought that sins could be paid for with works, and now it is suddenly faced with many and great sins which it knew nothing of, much less paid for. Then this conscience is cast down into despair, and the devil lends a hand and turns all the good works into sins. What can be done then? This soul knows nothing of the kingdom of grace, or that God's steadfast love prevails over us; nor is it in the habit of trusting in His grace. Then both, the works and the teaching of salvation by works, collapse and disappear like smoke. Yes, it is good to talk about works and make money at it, until that certain hour comes when the devil and God's judgment stir up the conscience. Then one finds out how dangerous, poisonous, destructive, and damnable such a teaching is; but then it is too late, unless God chooses to perform a special sign or miracle.

But he who is in the kingdom of grace is of a different heart, regardless of what sins he feels, what sins the devil invents, whether the devil undoes his good works, or God's judgment frightens or threatens him. This heart will still declare that these are certainly terrible, dark clouds; but God's grace prevails and rules over us. The heaven of grace is mightier than the clouds of sin. The heaven of grace remains forever; the clouds of sin dissolve. For this verse does not deny—no, it affirms—that believers are well aware of God's judgment, of sin, death, and the devil, and are even terrified by them. But it also says that they have courage, and that grace is above all and retains the upper hand and dominion, so that they can sing: "Praise be to God that His grace prevails over us and is mightier than our sins." Remember that all this is done without works, and must be done without works, lest both grace and heaven be lost in a single moment. David was often tempted like this, and he complains in Ps. 119:92: "If Thy Law had not been my delight, I should have perished in my affliction." Whoever has not been tempted cannot understand this and will probably have to attack his sins with good works, to atone for them and to stifle them. But that is like trying to put out a fire with straw, or measure the air with a spoon, or similar useless and worthless efforts.

Thirdly, the psalmist says: "Over us." Whom does he mean? With this word "us" he separates himself from all those who are not with us. As said before, the Lord's grace is over only those poor sinners who recognize and feel that they are bogged down in sin, death, and all misfortune. The work-righteous do not need grace. They feel in themselves no sin, death, or devil; instead, they feel only holiness, life, and heaven. They are the perfect darlings!³⁰ That makes this verse false and deceiving in two respects: first, our opponents consider our teaching and faith to be not God's grace but purely the doctrine of devils (1 Tim. 4:1) and the wrath of God. Secondly, our outward life can mean only that God is our enemy and has handed us over to the devil. Thus both our teaching and our life are controlled by the devil and not by God's grace. On the other hand, the lot of our enemies makes it seem that God is their friend and controls their teaching and life. Therefore these words are spiritual; they can be understood only by faith and in the Spirit, and they cannot be judged by outward appearance, lest the psalm degenerate into sheer nonsense and falsehood. For what we see with our eyes is different from

what these words proclaim. Therefore the psalm might conceivably read: “Cry out and blaspheme, all heathen! For God’s wrath and vengeance are over us forever without end!”

Now see how in this psalm David, the holy prophet and king, becomes an apostate Jew and associates himself with the heathen. He abandons Moses and all Judaism and becomes a heathen. For he sides with the heathen and not with the Jews. He Calls upon them to praise the Lord; this is clear and certain. But he does not write: “For God’s love rules over you heathen”; instead, he writes “over us,” as if he were among the heathen and were himself a heathen. He makes himself a heathen, not Jews out of the heathen. At least he makes heathen and Jews one people under one God, without any law or any Moses, solely on the strength of the fact that they praise and glorify God. Thereby he annuls the old Law in its entirety and shows that it is not necessary to observe it. And that it has been observed was only a sign of such praise and not a work or special offering to God, as the Jews, Turks, sophists, and reason itself maintain. But now that the praise of God has gone out to the heathen throughout the world, we are not to respect the signs of praise so much; but we should devote ourselves to praise itself, becoming men of praise rather than remaining Jews or heathen.

The fourth element of which the psalmist speaks is “His faithfulness.” This means God’s truth, to which He has bound and committed Himself through His dear Word, namely, to be our God and not to deprive us of His grace, so that we may be certain of His grace. As it was in the beginning, so it shall remain and endure forever. This should encourage us not to doubt His promise, even though its outward appearance, as I pointed out above, is far different and seems to be sheer wrath and no grace at all. For He will be faithful and keep His promise if only we hold fast to our faith and do not fall away in unbelief or impatience. The big thing is that we wait a little and bear our cross without wearying; for “hope does not disappoint us,” says St. Paul (Rom. 5:5). God cannot lie (Rom. 3:4 and Titus 1:2). Therefore we must learn that the aforementioned love and mercy are not visible but only cross and adversity, and this we feel. Our opponents have outward love and grace, although they do not recognize it. Much less do they respect the secret wrath with which God threatens them in His Word.

Therefore the kingdom of grace is and remains a secret kingdom, concealed from this world, maintained in Word and faith until the time of its revelation. Consequently, the godless do not like or desire it but say (Ps. 2:3): “Let us burst Their bonds asunder, and east Their cords from us.” They say: “We will not permit such a kingdom to rule over us,” as is written Luke 19:14: “We do not want this Man to reign over us.” Why not? Because such a kingdom, as I said before, condemns and rejects all their outward works and ways in which they trust and asks them instead to trust in God’s grace, which is mysterious and concealed, being promised solely by His Word and comprehended only by faith. Instead of praise and thanksgiving, therefore, they choose to blaspheme, curse, and persecute the dear kingdom of grace like madmen who fight against their own salvation and blessedness until they are destroyed and have achieved the goal of their struggle, as we read in Ps. 109:17:³¹ “He loved to curse; let curses come on him. He did not like blessing; may it be far from him!” An injury is not an injury if a man accepts it voluntarily.³² You cannot force a man to be thankful.

Now what is true of grace is also true of God’s faithfulness or truth. Outwardly His grace seems to be nothing but wrath, so deeply is it buried under two thick hides or pelts. Our opponents and the world condemn and avoid it like the plague or God’s wrath, and our own feeling about it is not different.

Peter says truthfully (2 Peter 1:19) that the Word is like a lamp shining in a dark place. Most certainly it is a dark place! God’s faithfulness and truth always must first become a great lie before it becomes truth. The world calls this truth heresy. And we, too, are constantly tempted to believe that God would abandon us and not keep His Word; and in our hearts He begins to become a liar. In short, God cannot be God unless He first becomes a devil. We cannot go to heaven unless we first go to hell. We cannot become God’s children until we first become children of the devil. All that God speaks and does the devil has to speak and do first. And our flesh agrees. Therefore it is actually the Spirit who enlightens and teaches us in the Word to believe differently. By the same token the lies of this world cannot become lies without first having become truth. The godless do not go to hell without first having gone to heaven. They do not become the devil’s children until they have first been the children of God.

As his fifth point the psalmist says “forever,” that is, without interruption and without end. This kingdom of grace is not only to prevail and last here on earth during our lifetime, but forever, after this life, in heaven. In the present time, too, it is to be so firm that it will never waver and fall. Even though

we are uncertain and at times stumble and fall through sin and error, still grace does not waver and fall. Nor may we seek a new grace or another kingdom, because that heaven is still open and that same kingdom of grace awaits me when I return. It is not true, as some falsely and deceivingly say, that Christ has atoned only for sins that precede Baptism, and that we must atone for the sins committed after Baptism. Nor are the dangerous and evil words of St. Jerome true, namely, that penance is the other plank to which we must cling when the ship of innocence has been wrecked after Baptism.³³ Do not talk to me of “another plank”! The ship is not wrecked; Baptism does not cease; the kingdom of grace does not collapse. Rather, as the psalm says, it “endures forever.” But if I fall out of the ship, very well, I climb back in; if I turn away from Baptism, I return to it; if I stray from the Kingdom, I come back to it. Baptism, ship, and grace endure forever and do not wobble or fall because I wobble and fall. Otherwise God Himself, who has promised that His faithfulness will endure forever, would fall.

To summarize, the devil does not become and is not a devil without first having been God. He does not become an angel of darkness unless he has first been an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). For what the devil speaks and does must first have been said and done by God. This the world believes and would have us believe. Therefore these are deep words, and a profound understanding is required to grasp that God’s grace and truth, or His love and faithfulness, rule over us and prevail. But it is comforting to him who can grasp it, if he is sure that all is God’s grace and truth, even when it seems to be the opposite, and if he can then say in spiritual defiance: “I know well that God’s Word must first become a great lie, even in myself, before it can become truth. I also know that the devil’s word must first become the delicate truth of God before it can become a lie. I must grant the devil his hour of godliness and ascribe devilhood to our God. But this is not the whole story. The last word is: ‘His faithfulness and truth endure forever.’”

THE ADMONITION

The psalmist admonishes and instructs us how to serve the Lord. He urges us to give praise and thanks. Since of ourselves we are nothing but have everything from God, it is easy to see that we can give Him nothing; neither can we repay Him for His grace. He demands nothing from us. The only thing left, therefore, is for us to praise and thank Him. First we must recognize in our hearts and believe that we receive everything from Him and that He is our God. Then out with it, and freely and openly confess this before the world—preach, praise, glorify, and give thanks! This is the real and only worship of God, the true office of the priest, and the finest, most acceptable offering—as St. Peter says (1 Peter 2:9): “You are a royal priesthood, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” Yes, our mouths will be slapped for such praise; for the world does not want to hear it and cannot stand it. But that is the risk if one wants to bring this sacrifice to God; for it is written: “Praise the Lord, all heathen.” It does not say that we should praise men or this world, but the Lord and His work or grace, not the works of men; for these are condemned.

This offering of praise, this thank offering, fulfills all that is meant by worship and service in the Old Testament, and we no longer need them. This psalm requires of the heathen no other offering to God than to praise and thank Him, confessing and preaching God’s grace and faithfulness. Yes, even the offerings of the Old Testament were nothing; they were condemned and cursed if they were made with the intention of serving God with them in the sense of giving Him something through the offering or work. In this connection read Ps. 50:8–14, Is. 1:11–17, Jer. 7:21–23, and many other passages. For that was not the intent of Moses’ command. Instead, as he says in Deut. 26, they were not to bring such offerings except as thanks or as a sign of thanks and praise. Not as though they wanted to do God a great service with them, or as though God needed the flesh of oxen and the blood of calves; but He says: “Offer Me thank offerings,” or “Thank offerings praise Me.” This is especially clear in wonderful Ps. 51: “For Thou hast no delight in sacrifice; were I to give a burnt offering, Thou wouldst not be pleased” (v. 16). As though he were to say: “If offerings or works could do it, I would be a king. I could find ten gulden to buy a cow to sacrifice. But another kind of sacrifice is demanded here.” Since, however, they would not give up their sacrificing, God thoroughly destroyed them and instituted throughout the world the true sacrifice, the offering of praise, as He says in this psalm and in Mal. 1:10–11: “I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hands. For from the rising of the sun to its setting My name is great among the heathen, and in every place incense is offered to My name and a pure offering.” This is the offering of thanks, when by preaching and confession in all

the world the name of the Lord is magnified and glorified. To make His name great is the fine, pure offering of which the psalmist is speaking here.

Since offerings were damned among the Jews because of the misguided desire to make works and merit of them, what value can we Christians grant to such practices as offering Masses, monastic vows, pilgrimages, saint worship, and the like—especially since they are far worse than the offerings of the Jews? For one thing, the offerings of the Jews were at least instituted by God and were based on, and commanded by, Scripture. But our offerings and vows are unscriptural, nothing but figments and inventions of men. This in itself is enough to condemn them, for no man should institute or begin the worship of God, instruct God, or prescribe how He should be worshiped. Furthermore, in the New Testament the offering of thanks is to be the true worship of God, and no works are to count at all. Grace cannot stand it when we want to give to God or establish merit or pay Him with our works. This is the greatest of blasphemies and idolatries and is nothing less than the denial and even ridicule of God. These offerings of works spell the elimination of thank offerings, which cannot exist alongside them. Whoever wants to earn and win by works certainly does not expect to receive anything for nothing or through grace. Instead, he wants to do business and haggle with God. But whoever receives nothing by grace will not give thanks either.

They counter by saying: “A promise must be kept; tiffs is the teaching of both divine and human law.”³⁴ Answer: There are two kinds of promises: a promise to God and a promise to man. We can promise nothing to God except that we want to accept Him as God and praise and thank Him for all His benefits and grace, as the patriarch Jacob promised and spoke (Gen. 28:21): “The Lord shall be my God.” This is the promise asked of us in the First Commandment. We can give Him nothing, nor does He need what we have; for He has given us all that we have anyway. But He wants to be our God. This explains why the sophists cannot understand the sayings in the Psalter and elsewhere in Scripture concerning vows to God. They apply them to their own self-imposed vows, whereas only the vow of thanks is meant, and obedience to the First Commandment, as Ps. 116:12–14 tells us:³⁵ “What shall I render to the Lord for all His bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord; I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all His people.” Here you see that he knows no other way to repay the Lord except to preach God and thank Him in the presence of all His people and thus keep his vow according to the First Commandment. This he cans his cup of salvation; that is, it makes him blessed, as Ps. 50:23 says: “He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors Me; to him I will show the salvation of God!” Also in Rom. 10:9 we read: “If you confess with your lips, you will be saved.” In Scripture “cup” means that Which is one’s portion. This is the sense: “Some want to buy God with works; they receive their portion, a cup of destruction. My cup, my portion, shall be to praise God; this is salvation and blessedness.”

Now when vows conflict with the promise to give thanks, then they should be condemned and annulled, as in the case of monastic vows and others mentioned above. For these vows are made with the godless and damnable intent of buying God’s favor and of deserving grace; they do not leave the way open for pure, undeserved grace. The pope himself says: “One need not keep bad vows.”³⁶ Similarly, when we promise something to man, it should and must be done with the understood provision, even though not stated, that it not be contrary to God. For one can promise nothing against God. When, for instance, the emperor, at his coronation, swears this and that to the pope and finds afterwards that one or more points are contrary to God, then he needs no absolution from his oath; for it never was a genuine oath and could never have been meant or sworn in the power of an oath.³⁷ Long before, at Baptism, he swore not to do anything contrary to God, but to help, praise, and glorify His name and Gospel. In the face of such an oath the pope can demand nothing from him, no matter what it may be.

But what I have said of the emperor’s oath I say of an men’s oaths. One cannot deny that some oaths are bad, and in taking an oath one can err just as easily as in all other matters. Therefore one should not put up such a howl, protesting: “Yes, yes, you have vowed and sworn; hence you must keep it.” My dear fellow, it is not enough that I have sworn something. I might swear that I want to be a Turk or a Jew; but I promised God more at my Baptism, and I am more obligated to keep this than any other vow. And if my later vows deviate a hairbreadth from my first promise, then I shall trample them underfoot in order not to deny my God or despise His grace. It is highly necessary to make a careful and sharp distinction between oaths, because these are serious and solemn matters and are like a divine service. Even

distinguished ecclesiastical personages can easily make a mistake here. And this is not a matter for just anyone to judge, as some wild and insolent fellows think.³⁸

These four principal parts I should like to have emphasized in this little psalm. And note that this is the proper and fruitful way to deal with Scripture, as Paul (1 Cor. 14:6) also exalts four such points that he would treat in Scripture: “Now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how shall I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?” He refers to “speaking in tongues,” which is nothing else than reading Scripture orally. Yet he wants to treat such tongues or simple Scripture in four ways, not because he wants to derive various meanings from it, as Origen, Jerome, and men of the same kind do with their allegories.³⁹ No, Paul wants to give a simple meaning to Scripture, just as I (I hope) have done here. Paul says that prophecy is the interpretation of the writing of prophets in the sense of Christ. Instruction, he says (Titus 2:1), is to preach the faith that saves us through grace without merit. Knowledge, he says, is advice and discrimination in outward usages and custom (1 Cor. 8:1–13), which I have here called admonition, even though in such advice I have touched on offerings and vows. Revelation is, of course, something more than allegory, namely, the capacity to hit upon something in Scripture that not everyone discovers, although he may have some or all of the other three things.

My main reason for doing this is to move and instruct all who need it, to search out and deal with the core of our Christian doctrine, wherever it may be found throughout the Bible. And the core is this: that without any merit, as a gift of God’s pure grace in Christ, we attain righteousness, life, and salvation, and that there is no other way or path, no other means or effort, that can help us to attain it. Every day I experience only too well how insistently the devil assails this core in an effort to wipe it out. And although tired “saints” consider it unnecessary to keep at this matter—they imagine that they know it inside out and have learned all there is to know— still I know how wrong they are, and that they know absolutely nothing about the importance of this point. If this one teaching stands in its purity, then Christendom will also remain pure and good, undivided and unseparated; for this alone, and nothing else, makes and maintains Christendom. Everything else may be brilliantly counterfeited by false Christians and hypocrites; but where this falls, it is impossible to ward off any error or sectarian spirit. This I know indeed, and I have experienced it so often that without this teaching I could never refute what either the Turks or the Jews believe.

And wherever sects arise, you may be sure that they have certainly fallen away from this principal teaching, regardless of the fact that they do a great deal of mouthing about Christ and put on much polish and finery. This doctrine permits no sects to arise, because without fail the Holy Spirit is there; He lets no sectarianism take root, but gives and maintains harmony. Particularly when you hear an immature and unripe saint trumpet that he knows very well that we must be saved through the grace of God, without our own works, and then pretend that this is a snap for him, well, then have no doubt that he has no idea of what he is talking about and probably will never find out. For this is not an art that can be completely learned or of which anyone could boast that he is a master. It is an art that will always have us as pupils while it remains the master. And all those who do understand and practice it do not boast that they can do everything. On the contrary, they sense it like a wonderful taste or odor that they greatly desire and pursue; and they are amazed that they cannot grasp it or comprehend it as they would like. They hunger, thirst, and yearn for it more and more; and they never tire of hearing about it or dealing with it, just as St. Paul himself confesses that he has not yet obtained it (Phil. 3:12). And in Matt. 5:6 Christ calls those blessed who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Whoever is interested may learn a lesson from my example, which I shall now confess. A few times—when I did not bear this principal teaching in mind—the devil caught up with me and plagued me with Scripture passages until heaven and earth became too small for me.⁴⁰ Then all the works and laws of man were right, and not an error was to be found in the whole papacy. In short, the only one who had ever erred was Luther. All my best works, teaching, sermons, and books had to be condemned. The abominable Mohammed almost became my prophet, and both Turks and Jews were on the way to pure sainthood. Therefore, dear brother, be not proud or smug, and certain that you know Christ well. You hear what I confess to you, admitting what the devil was able to do against Luther, who is supposed to be a doctor in this art, who has preached, composed, written, said, sung, and read so much in these matters but must still remain a student and sometimes may not be either master or student. So take my

advice, and do not celebrate too soon. Are you still standing? Then see that you do not fall (1 Cor. 10:12)! You can do anything? Watch out that your skill does not desert you! Be concerned, be humble, and pray that you may grow in this art and be protected against the crafty devil, who is called “Smart Aleck” and “Quick Fist,”⁴¹ who can do anything and learn anything very quickly.

If by choice or of necessity you must deal with matters concerning the law, works, sayings, and examples of the fathers, then remember first of all to keep this principal teaching before you, and do not be caught without it, so that the dear sun of Christ will shine in your heart. Then you can freely and safely discuss and discriminate in all laws, examples, sayings, and works. If there is something good or true in it, then I know that it is good and right for this life only, because Christ alone is good and right for grace and the life to come. And whenever you neglect this, be assured that the laws, sayings, examples, and works, with their attractive appearance and the great reputation of the persons concerned, will so confuse you that you will not know whether you are coming or going. I have observed this in St. Bernard: whenever he begins to speak of Christ, it is a pure pleasure to follow; but when he goes beyond this and talks of rules or works, then it is no longer St. Bernard.⁴² The same thing happens to St. Augustine, Gregory, and all the rest; when Christ is not in them, they are nothing but secular professors, like philosophers or lawyers.

Therefore in Scripture Christ is called the Cornerstone on which all that is to stand before God must be founded and built.⁴³ Whatever is not founded and built on Him, but without Him, will be destroyed and cannot endure. What else is lacking in these sects and foolish religionists but that they have forsaken this Cornerstone and have slipped back into works? They cannot get out of the predicament but must reduce to mere human works even Baptism and the Sacraments, which are God’s Word and institution. Thus the Anabaptists claim that Baptism is nothing if one is not previously sanctified. They do not want to acquire holiness through and from Baptism, but by their piety they want to make Baptism holy and wholesome. As I see it, this is to lose the Cornerstone completely and to be justified, not through the grace of Christ in Baptism but through one’s own self, so that Baptism gives nothing, creates nothing, brings nothing. Instead, we bring and give everything to Baptism beforehand, so that it is nothing but an unnecessary symbol by which one is supposed to be able to recognize such pious folk. But Baptism is not a permanent enough sign or mark to guarantee that one should be recognizable by it, since it happens only once, and then nobody can see it any more.

The fanatics do the same thing with their Sacrament, which does not sanctify or bring grace but shows and demonstrates how blessed and holy they are without the Sacrament. And what else have such divisions, countless sects, factions, and idolatries of all manner of foolish fanatics, priests, monks, and nuns accomplished in the papacy than that they have turned away from Christ to gain righteousness through their works? This is why St. Paul taught the Ephesians and the Colossians so vigorously that Christ is our Head, and that we should cling diligently to this Head and thus stay together and grow as members of one body.⁴⁴ The devil wastes no time on vacations and sleep. He would gladly tear us away from this Head. He knows well that this central teaching will break his neck and crush his serpent’s head, as is foretold in Gen. 8:15.

But God, our dear eternal Father, who through His dear Son and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, has so richly enlightened us—may He strengthen us with perfect faith through His Holy Spirit and give us power to follow His light faithfully and diligently, and praise and extol Him together with all heathen, both in teaching and in life. To Him be praise and honor forevermore for all His unspeakable mercies and gifts!

PSALM • 118

Translated by
GEORGE BETO

1. *O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His steadfast love endures forever!*
2. *Let Israel say: His steadfast love endures forever.*
3. *Let the house of Aaron say: His steadfast love endures forever.*
4. *Let those who fear the Lord say: His steadfast love endures forever.*
5. *Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free.*
6. *With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can man do to me?*
7. *The Lord is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.*

8. *It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in man.*
9. *It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in princes.*
10. *All nations surrounded me; in the name of the Lord I cut them off!*
11. *They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; in the name of the Lord I cut them off!*
12. *They surrounded me like bees; they were extinguished like a fire of thorns; in the name of the Lord I cut them off!*
13. *I was pushed hard, so that I was falling; but the Lord helped me.*
14. *The Lord is my Strength and my Song; He has become my Salvation.*
15. *Hark, glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: The right hand of the Lord does valiantly,*
16. *the right hand of the Lord is exalted, the right hand of the Lord does valiantly!*
17. *I shall not die; but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.*
18. *The Lord has chastened me sorely, but He has not given me over to death.*
19. *Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.*
20. *This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.*
21. *I thank Thee that Thou hast humbled me and hast become my Salvation.*
22. *The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief Cornerstone.*
23. *This is the Lords doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.*
24. *This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*
25. *Save us, we beseech Thee, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech Thee, give us success!*
26. *Blessed be He who enters in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord.*
27. *The Lord is God, and He has given us light. Bind the festival with branches, up to the horns of the altar!*
28. *Thou art my God, and I will give thanks to Thee; Thou art my God; I will extol Thee.*
29. *O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever!*

PREFACE

To the venerable lord, Fredrick, Abbot of Saint Giles¹ of Nuremberg, my gracious lord and patron. Grace and peace in Christ, our Lord and Savior!

MY venerable and dear lord and patron:

While I should like to show my gratitude to you for your love and favor to me, I am, by earthly standards, a beggar. Besides, even if I had much, there is nothing special I could do for you in your position. And so I turned to my wealth, which I treasure so much, and took up my beloved psalm, the beautiful *Confitemini*, putting down on paper the thoughts which came to me. I am quite idle here in the wilderness;² and yet, in order to spare my head, I need to pause and rest occasionally in the hard work that I hope to complete soon, the translation of the prophets into German.³

These thoughts of mine I decided to send you as a gift. I have nothing better. Though some may consider this a lot of useless drivel, I know it contains nothing evil or unchristian. This is my own beloved psalm. Although the entire Psalter and all of Holy Scripture are dear to me as my only comfort and source of life, I fell in love with this psalm especially. Therefore I call it my own.⁴ When emperors and kings, the wise and the learned, and even saints could not aid me, this psalm proved a friend and helped me out of many great troubles. As a result, it is clearer to me than all the wealth, honor, and power of the pope, the Turk, and the emperor. I would be most unwilling to trade this psalm for all of it.

But lest anyone, knowing that this psalm belongs to the whole world, raise his eyebrow at my claim that this psalm is mine, may he be assured that no one is being robbed. After all, Christ is mine, and yet He belongs to all believers. I will not be jealous but will gladly share what is mine. Would to God all the world would claim this psalm for its own, as I dot Peace and love could not compare with such a friendly quarrel. Sad to say, there are few, even among those who should do better, who honestly say even once in their lifetime to Scripture or to one of the psalms: "You are my beloved book; you must be my very own psalm."

The neglect of Scripture, even by spiritual leaders, is one of the greatest evils in the world. Everything else, arts or literature, is pursued and practiced day and night, and there is no end of labor and effort; but Holy Scripture is neglected as though there were no need of it. Those who condescend to read it want to absorb everything at once. There has never been an art or a book on earth that everyone has so quickly mastered as the Holy Scriptures. But its words are not, as some think, mere literature;

they are words of life,⁵ intended not for speculation and fantasy but for life and action. But why complain? No one pays any attention to our lament. May Christ our Lord help us by His Spirit to love and honor His holy Word with all our hearts. Amen. I commit myself to your prayer.

Out of the desert. July 1, 1530. MARTIN LUTHER

THE BEAUTIFUL CONFITEMINI

1. *O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His steadfast love endures forever!*

This psalm is a general statement of thanksgiving for all the kindnesses God daily and unceasingly showers on all men, both good and evil. That is the custom of the holy prophets. When they want to thank and praise God for a particular blessing, they begin with lofty words that are all-inclusive in their praise of every one of His wonders and kindnesses. Since this psalm praises God especially for the greatest benefit He bestowed on the world, namely, for Christ and His kingdom of grace—first promised and now revealed—the writer begins with a general statement of praise: “O give thanks to the Lord; for He is a loving, gracious, good, and compassionate God, who continually does good and abundantly heaps His goodness upon us.”

You must not read the words “good” and “His steadfast love” with dull indifference. Nor dare you skim over them “as the nuns read the Psalter,”⁶ or as choirmasters and choristers bleat and bellow these fine words in the churches. No, you must bear in mind that these are vibrant, significant, and meaningful words; they express and emphasize one theme: God is good, but not as a human being is good; from the very bottom of His heart He is inclined to help and do good continually. He is not given to anger or inclined to punish except where necessary and where persistent, impenitent, and stubborn wickedness compels and drives Him to it. A human being would not delay punishment and restrain anger as God does; he would punish a hundred thousand times sooner and harder than God does.

God abundantly and convincingly proves His friendly and gracious favor by His daily and everlasting goodness, as the psalmist writes: “His steadfast love endures forever”; that is, He unceasingly showers the best upon us. He is the Creator of our bodies and souls, our Protector by day and by night, and the Preserver of our lives. He causes the sun and the moon to shine on us, fire, air, water, and the heavens to serve us. He causes the earth to give food, fodder, wine, grain, clothes, wood, and all necessities. He provides us with gold and silver, house and home, wife and child, cattle, birds, and fish. In short, who can count it all? And all this is bountifully showered upon us every year, every day, every hour, and every minute. Who could measure even this one goodness of God, that He gives and preserves a healthy eye or hand? When we are sick or must get along without one of these, then we begin to realize what a blessing it is to have a healthy hand, foot, leg, nose, or finger; then we begin to realize what a blessing bread, clothing, water, fire, and home are.

If we human beings were not so blind and so smug and indifferent toward the blessings of God, there would not be a man on earth, no matter how wealthy, who would trade an empire or a kingdom for them; for he would surely be robbed in the deal. What is a kingdom compared with a sound body? What is all the money and wealth in the world compared with one sunlit day? Were the sun to stop shining for one day, who would not rather be dead; for what would then be the value of wealth and power? What would the finest wine or malmsey⁷ in the world amount to if we had to go without water for one day? What would our magnificent castles, houses, silk, satin, purple, golden jewelry, precious stones, all our pomp and glitter and show help us if we had to do without air for the length of one Our Father?⁸

These gifts of God are the greatest and also the most despised. Because they are so common, no one thanks God for them. People simply accept and use them daily, as though it had to be so, and we had a perfect right to them and did not even need to thank God. In the meantime they are quick and frantic to do, worry, quarrel, wrangle, strive, and storm after unnecessary money and goods, honor and luxury—in short, after something which cannot hold a candle⁹ to the blessings mentioned above. These things are not worth a fraction of the others. Instead, they hinder us in the happy and peaceful enjoyment of the common blessings, so that we can neither recognize them as such nor thank God for them. This is the work of the devil, who will not let us use or recognize the goodness of God and His abundant daily blessings, lest we enjoy too much happiness.

Now, tell me, how many people on earth understand this verse? True, even the worst scoundrel who sings or hears this verse in church imagines that he thoroughly understands its meaning. He feels that he has drained the last drop of meaning from it, even though he has never in his whole life thought much

about it or given thanks for the milk he drew from his mother's breast, to say nothing of all the other blessings which, during his whole life, God has immeasurably and unceasingly showered upon him. If God were a usurer and demanded an accounting, his hourly sins of ingratitude would be more numerous than the leaves and grass in the forest.

Therefore this verse should be in the heart and mouth of every man every day and every moment. Every time he eats or drinks, sees, hears, smells, walks, stands; every time he uses his limbs, his body, his possessions, or any creature, he should recall that if God did not give him all this for his use and preserve it for him despite the devil, he would not have it. He should be aroused and trained to thank God for His daily goodness with a joyful heart and cheerful faith and to say to Him: "Truly, Thou art a kind and benevolent God! For Thy kindness and goodness to me, an unworthy and ungrateful creature, are eternal, that is, unceasing. Praise and thanks are due Thee!"

This verse also serves to comfort us in all our misfortunes. We are such sorties, such sapless sufferers. A pain in the leg or the stirring of a little leaf¹⁰ can cause us to fill heaven and earth with our howls and wails, our grumbling and cursing. We fail to see what a little evil such a small leaf is compared with the immeasurable blessings of God that we still have and possess. We are like a king who becomes frantic because he loses one pfennig. Though he owns half the world, with countless money and possessions, he plays the martyr, throws a tantrum, curses, denounces God, and fulminates against Him with other blasphemous language, as today cursing troopers show their manliness by resorting to profanity.

The good God permits such small evils to befall us merely in order to arouse us snorers from our deep sleep and to make us recognize, on the other hand, the incomparable and innumerable benefits we still have. He wants us to consider what would happen if He were to withdraw His goodness from us completely. In that spirit Job said (2:10): "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" Job, you see, knew very well how to sing this beautiful *Confitemini* and this particular verse; for he said (Job 1:21): "As God wills, so let it be; the name of the Lord be praised." He did not simply look at the evil, as we would-be saints do; he kept in sight the goodness and grace of the Lord. With this he comforted himself and overcame evil with patience.

We also are to look at our misfortunes in no other way than that with them God gives us a light by which we may see and understand His goodness and kindness in countless other ways. Then we conclude that such small misfortunes are barely a drop of water on a big fire or a little spark in the ocean. Then we understand and love the words: "O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His steadfast love endures forever!" In translating I did not want to deviate too much from the Hebrew, but we Germans would say: "O what a faithful, loving, and good Lord Thou art! Thou dost bestow on me and on all the world goodness and mercy, now and forever. Thanks be to Thee!"

The Hebrew word **רַחֲמִים**, which was *ἐλεημοσύνη* to the Greeks and until now "mercy" to the Germans, I translated as "steadfast love"; for it really means "goodness in action."¹¹ Christ Himself uses the word when He says (Matt. 12:7): "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." And St. Paul tells Timothy (1 Tim. 6:2) that servants should gladly serve believing masters, for they receive the benefit. In Matt. 6:1 Christ says: "Beware of practicing your piety." This is what we call "alms," from the Greek *ἐλεημοσύνη*. Although the word "alms" came to be used incorrectly when referring to a piece of bread for the beggar at our door, it really means *ἐλεημοσύνη* **רַחֲמִים**, "goodness in action," such as God grants us and we, in turn, should show toward others.

"Forever" is not to be understood to mean only the goodness of heaven after this life, when there will be life everlasting. The Hebrew word **לְעוֹלָם** means, as we say in German, "continually" or "always," be it here or hereafter. For instance, we refer to a restless person by saying: "Why this everlasting running around? Why is he always on the go?" It was necessary for me to explain and to interpret these words in order to understand this verse; for it is used frequently in Scripture, especially in the Psalter. This very verse teaches us which sacrifice pleases God most. We cannot perform a greater or finer deed, or a nobler service to God, than to offer thanks, as He Himself tells us (Ps. 50:23): "He who brings thanks-giving as his sacrifice honors Me, and this is the way I show My salvation." Such an offering pleases Him beyond all gifts, endowments, monasteries, or whatever. He says (Ps. 69:30–31):

“I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify Him with thanksgiving.”¹² This will please the Lord more than a bullock with horns and hooves.

By the same token, while praise and gratitude to God are the believer’s highest service both on earth and in heaven, ingratitude is the most shameful vice and the greatest contempt of God; yet this world is full, full, full of it to high heaven. Nevertheless, God is such a gracious Lord, as this verse declares, that in spite of this ingratitude He does not cease doing good. He says in our psalm: “His steadfast love endures forever.” His sun rises on both good and evil; His rain falls on the grateful and the ungrateful (Matt. 5:45). He gives as much wealth, power, and as many children to scoundrels as He does to the saints, in fact, much more. He guards against war, pestilence, famine, and all the plagues of the devil. This is divine goodness, which never grows slack or weary in the face of wickedness. No man could ever be so kind, for men cannot stand ingratitude. Ingratitude has driven men mad, crazy, and insane, as the story of Timon shows.¹³ It is too much for human nature to do good and to receive nothing but evil in return.

2. Let Israel say: His steadfast love endures forever.

Here the psalmist gives thanks for temporal government and blessed peace, both of which are gifts of God and surely the greatest of temporal gifts. If there were no government or peace, we could not exist. Israel was the kingdom founded by God and entrusted to King David, as Ps. 78:70–71 says: “He chose David, His servant, to be the shepherd of Israel, His people.”¹⁴ Accordingly, he thanks God for this kingdom and urges everyone to join him in thanksgiving. He also gives an example and a precept for all kings, princes, lords, lands, people, and subjects, to praise and thank God for government and peace in their respective countries and nations, each community, as an Israel, for its own.

The absence of continual war, discord, famine, bloodshed, sedition, murder, and misery in countries, cities, and villages, as well as the continued presence of trades, commerce, and professions—this is just as great a miracle and just as great a proof of the power of God as the creation of the world out of nothing and its continued preservation. For the world is full of devils, and, as we see daily, there are many wanton scoundrels among peasants, townsmen, nobles, lords, and princes. They delight in stealing, robbing, lying, cheating, war, destruction, and disaster. If a powerful God did not check and restrain the devil, human ingenuity and might could not keep the peace and maintain government and authority for a single day. It is, therefore, not without reason that St. David urges men to thank God for temporal peace, authority, and government.

Here lords and princes, as well as subjects, should learn that the government of a land and the obedience of the people are a gift of God—a gift bestowed out of nothing but His pure goodness. Our sword and human wisdom are of no avail, even though some mad princes and lords presumptuously claim that they rule land and people with their power and govern them by their reason. Especially the haughty bigwigs among the nobility and the smart alecks in the cities imagine that they run everything, as though God could not get along without them.¹⁵ But sensible lords and nobles know better. And David, the foremost of all kings and princes, also declares otherwise. Whoever will not believe, let him read history, in Scripture as well as in Roman and pagan literature. There is abundant evidence.

Certainly in the recent insurrection God demonstrated clearly that neither human power nor skill, but He alone governs the world.¹⁶ For these very same bigwigs who would rob God of His honor by bragging and boasting of their role in suppressing the insurrection were at that time the most fear-stricken wretches I have ever seen. Now they forget the God who rescued them when in sheer fright they filled their pants. We still smell the stench whenever one of these bigwigs is near. Unfortunately, in those days knighthood had neither heart nor courage. Its impudence and pride lead me to believe that they defy and tempt God to send a new insurrection, that He could show them once more whether the bigwig or God’s goodness and power holds the mob in leash. Well, if someone were to shake the tree, the bigwigs would come tumbling down. For they are overripe, and they are pained no end by the momentary peace which God is graciously maintaining, apparently by force and with great difficulty.

So far as I am concerned, I like to see them strut and brag; for it serves to remind me how valiantly they fled in fear before the wretched peasants in the insurrection. Otherwise I would need to have the story engraved in stone or written in a book for a perpetual remembrance. Now I am spared the expense and effort; for whenever one hears or sees one of these bigwigs, the insurrection is painted on him in lurid colors. One is always forced to ask: “Say, isn’t this one of those who defied the emperor? Didn’t he

give up his strong castle for a piece of straw and a log? Isn't he one of those undaunted heroes and brave fire-eaters who now thunder out oaths by St. Velten, Potzmacht, St. Quirinius, St. Antonius,¹⁷ although during the insurrection they could only sing woe and lament?"

Scripture declares that God established the states of masters and subjects, and that temporal government is His, as David testifies (Ps. 18:40): "Thou didst make my enemies turn their backs to me." And of his own people he says (Ps. 144:2): "He subdues ray people under me."¹⁸ Here we find little pride in David, as though he could govern his people with power or wisdom. Although he had the finest laws and customs, established by God through Moses, to aid him, together with the prophets who had anointed and confirmed him as king by God's command, he had learned by experience what the power and wisdom of kings and princes can do in a nation if God Himself does not lend a hand. Absalom, his own son, and later Bichri¹⁹ taught him who was king in the land. Likewise Daniel declares (4:17; 5:21): "The most high God rules over the kingdom of men and sets over it whom *He will*."²⁰ not whom we will or think. Daniel is simply saying that temporal government is purely and solely a gift and grace of God, which no man can establish or maintain by his own wisdom or strength.

It is futile to expect to subdue subjects, be they peasants or townsmen, by swaggering. A peasant can draw a knife and kill as well as a noble bigwig does. God must do it, and He tells them (Rom. 13:2): "Therefore he who resists government will be punished." Such words are the answer; for God insists on it, and His threats will be fulfilled. When subjects are ripe for it, as the peasants were in the revolt, God sentences them to rebellion or disobedience, that they may get a good beating. The masters also are punished by such an insurrection because they lack gratitude for His goodness and benefits and fail to give honor to Him who continually maintains and protects peace, obedience, law, and government. This verse counsels Israel to thank God and to confess that His steadfast love endures forever. He always maintains peace and preserves government, no matter how ungrateful and unworthy we may be. Without Him there would be murder and war in the country, and revolt and lawlessness in the cities.

Particularly in Germany does He now maintain peace with a special show of power, though there is precious little of it. It is evident that at the present time there is not a single soul in Germany who would preserve law and order in the face of these lawless and robbing nobles or protect government from such faithless and thievish subjects. Robbery and stealing abound; assassins follow their singular practices; men plot and rage. Yet no one's conscience is pricked by these sins against God. I am of the opinion that our present peace hangs by a silk thread; in fact, it is solely in God's hands, above and beyond our will and despite the fuming and the raving of all the devils. If human wisdom and the power of man were governing Germany today, she would be lying in ruins tomorrow. Let us, therefore, thank God and pray that His goodness, as in the past, may remain with Israel forever.

3. Let the house of Aaron say: His steadfast love endures forever.

This is a prayer of thanksgiving for a particular gift of God, namely, spiritual government, including priests, preachers, teachers, in short, the precious Word of God and the holy Christian Church. The greatness of this gift is beyond the grasp and imagination of any man. Only the grace and benevolence of God, not the power and wisdom of men, have prevented the triumph of error, schism, sects, and heresy in the world, and have preserved the Word, faith, the Spirit, Baptism, the Holy Scriptures, the Sacrament, and Christians. Without this the devil would overthrow and destroy it all, as he did with the Turk and the pope, as he is doing with the sectarians, and as he did in the past with the heretics. God Himself must preserve the church. Our flesh soon tires of the struggle, and the world cannot stand the strain.

Aaron was the high priest entrusted with the ministry. He was to teach the Law of Moses and to govern the Kingdom of Israel spiritually, before God, just as David was to rule over life and living outwardly, before the world. But as little as David could by his own power and wisdom conduct his earthly office, so little, and still less, could Aaron by his own might and wisdom rule spiritually over heart and soul, even though he had the advantage of the Law of Moses, which clearly outlined what he should teach and how he should govern. The Holy Spirit had to help him in his spiritual housekeeping, as he learned by his own experience when Korah tried to usurp the priesthood and incited all the people against him and Moses (Num. 16:1 ff.).

This shows you the great cunning of the pope and his vermin. They want to build and maintain the Christian Church with their wisdom, with outward regulations, with excommunications, without the

Word of God, and without praying and preaching—and then defend it by temporal power, fire, sword, and persecution. They do not need the goodness of God, but make this verse read: “Thank our excommunications and our sword, for their power endures forever.”

True Christendom preaches the Word of God; it forces itself on no one. If anyone will not believe, it lets him be and separates itself from him, as Christ teaches (Matt. 10:14 and 18:17), and as Paul consistently does in the Book of Acts. The unbeliever is left to God’s judgment. But our bloodhounds and murderers suppress the Word of God and devise their own articles of faith. Whoever refuses to accept them must burn. We have a frail, new Christendom, of which God and Scripture are ignorant.

Ignore those filthy fellows! They are not worthy of our thoughts in this wonderful psalm. In this verse we should thank God for giving us His Word and holy kingdom, and for preserving it to us in spite of the devil, the flesh, and the world, out of pure grace and goodness. We have treated it with ingratitude, laziness, indifference, and contempt; and we are utterly unworthy of this great treasure of eternal life. Christ Himself brought us the Word; we did not invent it. He must preserve it, for we cannot do so with our might and skill. Christ instituted, founded, and built Christendom. He must also protect and promote it. Our wisdom and might will not do it; neither will sword and fire, as Paul says (1 Cor. 3:5–9): “You are God’s field, God’s building. We are the servants; but neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the growth.”

4. Let those who fear the Lord say: His steadfast love endures forever.

This fourth prayer of thanksgiving is for the true assembly, namely, for the elect children of God and all the saints on earth, the genuine Christians. For them this psalm was especially written, and of them it speaks to the very end. In the previous three groups—as, first, in the spiritual government or ministry—there are many who abuse it to satisfy their avarice, pleasure, and honor. Consider the heretics, the sectarians, and our present priesthood. Yet the order is nonetheless good and holy and a divine gift, not to be condemned because of its abuse. Just so the whole world shamefully abuses the holy name of God, Baptism, the Sacrament, and the Gospel, in fact, God Himself and all His gifts. It does not fear God above all things.

It is also true that in the second group, the temporal rulers, the majority use that which has been entrusted to them for pride, vanity, pleasure, mischief, and all manner of wantonness, without any awe or fear of God. Nevertheless, government remains God’s good²¹ and useful gift and is a blessing in itself. And in the third category, among the common people generally, there is almost nothing but out-and-out abuse, since everyone uses his position, trade, skill, money, and possessions against his neighbor. At least he does not use them for the good and welfare of his neighbor, as God intends when He gives and preserves all things. There is no fear of God or respect of men. Yet God preserves them all, and for this He is to be praised and thanked.

This little group fears God and is pious. Its membership is gleaned from the three groups²² mentioned above. For there are still to be found pious, God-fearing, faithful bishops, ministers, preachers, and pastors. One also finds pious and godly princes, lords, nobles, aldermen, and judges, and many pious and God-fearing artisans, farmers, servants, and maids, though they are rare. Because of them God preserves the three groups listed above and bestows so much good on them. Were it not for these, the world would pass away this very hour, as Sodom and Gomorrah did.

The holy prophet David clearly separates this group from the other three, thereby indicating that the others do not honor, fear, or serve God. They serve themselves and seek and have their enjoyment in this life. They even persecute this little group incessantly and vehemently, and refuse to tolerate them, solely because these fear and trust God. They honor and teach the Word of God, which the others have no desire to hear or see. In Hebrew “to fear God” really means “to serve God.” The fear of God is the service of God. Now we cannot serve Him bodily and visibly here on earth, for He is invisible. We can serve Him spiritually by honoring, teaching, and confessing His Word and by living according to it. Of course, crosses, suffering, and affliction from the devil, the world, and our flesh are the results.

Now tell me, for what kind of gift may these people be expected to give thanks to God? It cannot be a place in a religious order, for God gives this to one of the other groups. Neither can it be temporal glory, honor, might, peace, or the obedience of men; for these are given to the second group. Nor can it be money, possessions, house, home, health, wife, or child; for all these God gives to those in the first group. It must be something higher and nobler, far surpassing these gifts of our temporal and transient

life. David devotes the rest of the psalm to this gift, while he reserves only the first three verses for the other three groups. What is it? He himself will discuss it fully. It is *comfort* and *help*²³ in every kind of suffering, want, and trouble. This is nothing less than the beginning of everlasting life. The world in the three groups mentioned above—the God-fearing excepted—with all its goods, might, and skill, could not give a single drop of this. For when man is in peril of death, there is small comfort in singing about dancing, pleasure, possessions, honor, power, skill, wife, and children.

As these would now honor God's Word and serve Him, they must truly suffer and endure mockery, shame, hurt, hatred, envy, defamation, fire, sword, death, and every other calamity from the other three groups, besides much evil, dangerous, and wicked treachery from the devil and his angels, and sin, unrest, and heartache from their own flesh. Paul says (2 Tim. 3:12): "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." And Christ Himself says (Luke 9:23): "If any man would come after Me, let him take up his cross." In Acts 14:22 we read: "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." And the wise man tells us (Ecclus. 2:1): "My child, if you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself to be tried."

Thus the favor bestowed by God on this little group is completely hidden from the world and appears to be nothing but eternal wrath, punishment, and torment from God Himself. By contrast, the ungodly in the three groups seem to be the very children of God, because they are so fully and richly endowed with the visible, temporal, and manifest blessings of God. Therefore it demands skill and grace to discern this secret and hidden blessing, especially since the psalmist praises its eternal character and devotes so many lavish words to it, as we shall hear. Though the spirit is willing and ready, the poor flesh is weak and unwilling (Matt. 26:41). The flesh would rather have evident, temporal consolation and help, and be above anxiety and need. But it must not and cannot be otherwise. There is no other way to life eternal than this narrow path, which so few come upon (Matt. 7:14) and only this small band finds. In short, the blessing of the three groups is this temporal life and being; the blessing of the small group is everlasting life. Therein lies the real difference.

5. *Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free.*

Here we see where this small band is. It does not move in manifest joy before the world. Anxiety is its abode. The psalmist pictures himself and his condition, namely, his many troubles. As is proper when one begins to talk about something, he is brief; he sums up all kinds of troubles and calls them "distress." Later he will say and explain more. Thus I may say: "Oh, how much Paul suffered!" This does not yet explain his sufferings; it merely indicates in a general way that he suffered, but not what he suffered. So the psalmist indicates also the comfort and help of God generally and briefly when he says: "The Lord answered me." As if he were saying: "I must always Suffer, but I am always comforted." He will soon describe how this happens and wherein his comfort consists.

In Hebrew the word "distress" means "something narrow." I surmise that the German noun for distress is also derived from an adjective meaning narrow.²⁴ It implies fear and pain, as in a process of clamping, squeezing, and pressing. Trials and misfortunes do squeeze and press, as is indicated by the proverb: "The great wide world is too narrow for me." In Hebrew "in a large place" is used in contrast to "distress."²⁵ "Distress" means tribulation and need; "in a large place" denotes consolation and help. Accordingly, this verse really says: "I called upon the Lord in my trouble; He heard me and helped me by comforting me." Just as distress is a narrow place, which casts us down and cramps us, so God's help is our large place, which makes us free and happy.

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 sees the sun shining through these thick, dark clouds and this gloomy weather. Faith has the courage to call with confidence to Him who smites it and looks at it with such a sour face.

That is skill above all skills. It is the work of the Holy Spirit alone and is known only by pious and true Christians. The self-righteous are ignorant of it. They prate about good works, although they have never known or performed any. Nor can they perform them, because human nature cannot acquire this skill. As soon as God touches it with a little trouble, it is frightened and filled with despair, and can only

think that grace is at an end and that God has nothing but wrath toward it. The devil also adds his power and trickery, in order to drown it in doubt and despondency. The situation is aggravated by the provoking sight of God showering abundant blessings on the other three groups. Then human nature begins to think that the others have only the grace of God and none of His anger. Then the poor conscience becomes weak; it would collapse were it not for the help and comfort that come from God, through pious pastors, or by some good Christian's counsel. Some there are who hang, drown, or stab themselves, or otherwise perish, shrivel, and wither.

Whoever can learn, let him learn. Let everyone become a falcon and soar above distress. 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. 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. 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. Trouble and distress constrain us and keep us within Christendom. Crosses and troubles, therefore, are as necessary for us as life itself, and much more necessary and useful than all the possessions and honor in the world.

We read: "I called upon the Lord." You must learn to call. Do not sit by yourself or lie on a couch, hanging and shaking your head. Do not destroy yourself with your own thoughts by worrying. Do not strive and struggle to free yourself, and do not brood on your wretchedness, suffering, and misery. Say to yourself: "Come on, you lazy burn; down on your knees, and lift your eyes and hands toward heaven!" Read a psalm or the Our Father, call on God, and tearfully lay your troubles before Him. Mourn and pray, as this verse teaches, and also Ps. 142:2: "I pour out my complaint before Him, I tell my trouble before Him." Likewise Ps. 141:2: "Let my prayer be counted as incense before Thee, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!" Here you learn that praying, reciting your troubles, and lifting up your hands are sacrifices most pleasing to God. It is His desire and will that you lay your troubles before Him. He does not want you to multiply your troubles by burdening and torturing yourself. He wants you to be too weak to bear and overcome such troubles; He wants you to grow strong in Him. By His strength He is glorified in you. Out of such experiences men become real Christians. Otherwise, men are mere babblers, who prate about faith and spirit but are ignorant of what it is all about or of what they themselves are saying.

You must never doubt that God is aware of your distress and hears your prayer. You must not pray haphazardly or simply shout into the wind. Then you would mock and tempt God. It would be better not to pray at all, than to pray like the priests and monks. It is important that you learn to praise also this point in this verse: "The Lord answered me and set me free." The psalmist declares that he prayed and cried out, and that he was certainly heard. If the devil puts it into your head that you lack the holiness, piety, and worthiness of David and for this reason cannot be sure that God will hear you, make the sign of the cross, and say to yourself: "Let those be pious and worthy who will! I know for a certainty that I am a creature of the same God who made David. And David, regardless of his holiness, has no better or greater God than I have."

There is only one God, of saint and sinner, worthy and unworthy, great and small. Regardless of the inequalities among us, He is the one and equal God of us all, who wants to be honored, called on, and prayed to by all. Before they became holy and worthy, what did the saints and the deserving souls have that I do not possess? Did they perhaps become holy and worthy by themselves? As unworthy sinners, did they not receive it from the same God from whom I seek to receive it, as a poor, unworthy sinner? He who gave it to David has promised it also to me. He has commanded me to demand, seek, pray, and knock (Matt. 7:7). At His command and promise I kneel down, raise my eyes to heaven, and beg for comfort and help. Thereby He is honored as the true God, from whom I implore help and comfort, as a true God deserves. Thus He regards me as worthy, and He will prove Himself to be what He sees that I think He is, a true God. He will not place His divine honor and name in jeopardy for my sake. Of this I am sure. He who does not call on God or pray to Him in trouble certainly does not consider Him to be God. Nor does he give Him the divine honor which we as creatures owe Him. Much is said about this elsewhere.²⁶

6. *With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can man do to me?*

Leaping with spiritual and eternal joy, the psalmist here shows us what happens when his prayer is heard. He says: "First, God plants this comfort in my heart. This is the subject of this verse, and later of verse eighteen. Next, He also supplies help externally and rescues me from trouble, of which the next verse speaks," Concerning comfort he says: "The Lord is on my side; that is, my cry has been heard. Although troubles still continue, I now have a mighty, strong, powerful Defender, who is with me and supports me. This makes it pleasant and easy to bear my yoke (Matt. 11:30). Who is this? It is the Lord Himself upon whom I called. In my sore distress He came to me through His eternal Word and Spirit. I scarcely know that I have been troubled." We must not, as the sectarians do, imagine that God comforts us immediately, without His Word. Comfort does not come to us without the Word, which the Holy Spirit effectively calls to mind and enkindles in our hearts, even though it has not been heard for ten years.

Note how bold and courageous the psalmist has become as a result of this comfort. He has the courage to rise and boast: "I am not afraid; I am not downhearted; I am of good cheer and refuse to worry. It is true that misery and sorrow are with me; they scowl at me and try to frighten me into begging for mercy. But I thumb my nose at them and say: 'Please, Mr. Bogeyman, don't eat me up! You look horrible enough to scare anyone who wants to be frightened. But I have another, lovelier vision, to light my way, like the sun, into eternal life. And so I ignore you, feeble and temporary dark cloud and angry little wind that you are!'"

Then in his God-given comfort he proudly and disdainfully defies the whole world and says: "What can man do to me?" This is meeting defiance with defiance. This could well drive kings, princes, and lords mad, to think that a poor sinner so despises and overwhelms them! He walks over them as though they were straw in the road and tauntingly asks: "Who is lying there?" Or don't you know what "man" means? This word includes every human being, be he Turk, Tartar, Roman emperor, pope, king, prince, bishop, or lord, with all their might, wisdom, wealth, land, and people. In short, it includes all the world, plus its god, the devil, and his angels. Cruel as they are, a poor, forlorn human being should surely be terrified by them. Nevertheless, the psalmist defiantly asks: "What can they do to me?"

"They can murder you!" "Then what? Can they revive me and kill me again? Or perhaps devour my body like a tasty morsel? They can't and won't kill me unless my Lord permits it and tells me so. Without His permission they may plot for a year and a day, draw their knives, gnash their teeth, bite their lips, and scowl. Still they must hear the truth of Ps. 112:10: 'The wicked man sees it and is angry; he gnashes his teeth and melts away; the desire of the wicked man comes to naught.'²⁷ Power and pride are their god and boast. My boast, however, is the Lord. Let them fight with Him. They will come to grief and dash against that Cornerstone until they stagger and are crushed. In the meantime I shall continue to sing: 'What can man do to me?'"

Finally, what can an emperor, a pope, a king, a prince, or the entire world do against God? Isaiah says that they are (40:17) *ἡ ἄλυσ*, a snap of the fingers. Again he says (33:11): "You conceive chaff, you bring forth stubble." Great and imposing are their threats. Their bellies are swollen as though they were about to give birth to mountains, a sight to behold; and yet it is only straw, fit for the fire. When it is born, it turns out to be chaff. So is their anger and the result of their threats, chaff which the wind drives away (Ps. 1:4). As long as the Lord remains with us, we shall stand, though they slay us. They have not killed the Lord who is with us; as long as He remains, and wherever He remains, we shall be with Him, as He says: "Because I live, you shall live also" (John 14:19). We shall watch with joy how He disposes of the strawbellies and their chaff on the day of His great fire. Then we shall learn what this really means: "What can man do to me?"

7. *The Lord is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.*

What a wonderful God we have! He not only stands by us in trouble, strengthening and comforting us by His Word and Spirit so that we survive—He also helps us win and conquer. In the end we have a greater revenge on our enemies than we could wish or ask for in the hour of trouble. This happens in one of two ways. One is the gracious way, that they who are hostile and bitter toward us and, as this text says, hate us are converted and become our friends. This brings the greatest pleasure and joy to all the saints on earth. Secondly, those who will not change graciously and in God's name come under wrath and perish in the devil's name, while the Christians survive in spite of them. This fate befell the Jews,

the Romans, the heathen, King Pharaoh, and the enemies of the Children of Israel. This fate has, thank God, befallen many in our day who thought they could devour us in three weeks. We are still alive, and they rot among the worms. And the same thing will happen to those princes, bishops, priests, and their ilk who still rage against us. They will perish, while our doctrine will survive.

If our teaching is the Word of God, this verse belongs to us. Whoever regards it as God's Word should never doubt that our enemies will not reach their goal, as we shall see. If anyone doubts that it is God's Word, it is of little consequence what he does or does not experience. From the very beginning of Christendom the world, emperors, kings, lords, the cunning, and the wise have devised ever so many plots. This verse, however, has outlasted them all and has held the field while it mocks them joyously and unafraid. "I shall look in triumph upon my enemies." The enemies, where are they? Where is their wrath? What has happened to their evil designs? Why have they not expunged this verse? What has happened to all the plots which the pope and his clergy have bungled during the past ten years? It is a good thing that they have thick skulls; hence it does not bother them that they failed so often and boasted and cheered for nothing. Finally, in their hardened hearts they will completely fulfill this verse and be destroyed, as the Psalter so abundantly declares.

8. *It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in man.*

9. *It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in princes.*

In the two previous verses the psalmist spoke of God-given comfort and help. Here he speaks of the comfort and aid given by men. He makes fun of such help; in fact, it is as if he had pity for those poor souls who have no God but rely on human comfort and aid. It is a miserable and uncertain comfort, which rests on men who themselves are not sure of their lives for a moment, as Isaiah testifies (2:22). And David says: "Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no help. When his breath departs, he returns to his earth; on that very day his plans perish" (Ps. 146:3-4). This statement is entirely true. One cannot rely even on holy men or pious princes, much less on tyrants and barbarians. God frequently takes pious men to Himself at an early age, and any plans and confidence based on them also perish. God extends the life of tyrants, as Solomon says (Eccl. 7:15), so that those who abandon God become the more persistent in their trust in man.

While Duke Frederick of Saxony, the pious prince whom we should never forget, was alive, both temporal and spiritual tyrants looked forward to his death.²⁸ They said: "Luther's heresy is dependent on two eyes; when those are closed, his heresy will die." They were sure that this prophecy of theirs was true. It was an open and shut case: "Luther's doctrine-rests on Duke Frederick. His trust and help rest on men and princes." They judged others by themselves. Just as they in their despair and in their defection from God placed their trust in princes and lords, so they concluded that we had done likewise, since they knew no other aid or comfort. I have never heard one of them indicate that he trusted in God. In all their shouting, pride, boasting, and defiance they have relied on the emperor, the princes, and the lords. And they brazenly and publicly admit it as though it were a praiseworthy confession of their holy faith in God, while it is just the opposite.

But they go on in their confidence. Day and night their thoughts, words, counsels, and plots are aimed at nothing else but how they may suppress us by force. Their greatest trust lies in the fact that they are many and we are few. It never occurs to them to call on God and pray for help. They do not need Him and can get along without Him! It is enough that they decide to do things thus and so! They are confident that they will not fail. For how could God cause so many mighty and wise people to fail? Of course, it is impossible! They are much too strong and too smart for Him. When King Pharaoh pursued the Children of Israel to the Red Sea, he did not look to God or ever once pray: "Lord God, give me counsel and help." No, he said: "Just as soon as I draw my sword, they are dead." Alas, he did not miss it by a hair, but planned so perfectly that the next morning he and his people lay drowned in the Red Sea. This is the fate of those who despise God's comfort and aid and rely on human consolation and the help of princes.

For this reason the psalmist declares twice: "It is better to take refuge in the Lord." He is telling us that men cannot comfort and advise us, and that princes cannot come to our rescue. For men do not have the right word or spirit to comfort and uphold a sorrowful heart. Nor do princes have a fist strong enough to help a wretched man and to suppress his enemies. God alone has the word of comfort and the fist for help, regardless of the size and the number of troubles and enemies. Experience substantiates

this. When a person is really downcast, how, pray tell me, can all the emperors, kings, princes, and all the power, skill, possessions, and honor of the whole world comfort him? They are all less than nothing, even in the trouble caused by one little everyday sin, unless God's Word gives counsel and comfort.

When one has a fatal disease or stands at death's door, what good can the power and might of this world do? If the children of the world were able to help, of what value would it be? Life is uncertain; they die daily, and their comfort and help must give place to death. As plain as this is, the devil is still mighty and will not let us believe it. It remains a rare and remarkable skill not to trust in men or princes. The world is and remains the same and trusts and relies on men and princes, and thus it rejects God and tramples His First Commandment underfoot. Men are willing to trust all sorts of false gods, but not the one true and faithful God. Therefore the prophet not only consoles us in these two verses but also laments the opposite, that there are such poor, miserable souls, and that they have no god. Emperors and princes, who cannot be sure of their lives for one moment, are the gods in whom their hearts rely and trust, exult and boast. Openly and brazenly they boast of their infamous idolatry, as the feeble-minded Philistines boasted of their mutilated Dagon, of whom they should have been ashamed. But they get what they have coming and what they ask for; and, like the Philistines, they are forever disgraced (1 Sam. 5:6; Ps. 78:66).

This is the time and place to list a few texts and examples from the Bible and other sources, to show that those who trusted in men always perished and crashed miserably. Remember how the dear prophets repeatedly preached and protested against the Children of Israel, who again and again made alliances, now with the Egyptians, then with the Assyrians, now with one king, then with another, just so they did not have to trust in God but could trust in men. But they were always badly whipped in this business. The heathen themselves talk about it in their stories, fables, and records. And out of my own lifetime I could give you a sackful of examples from the German lands alone. In high as well as low society I have seen the result of pacts, alliances, and trust in man, and what shameful failure ensued. This verse remains true: "It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in man." And again: "Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no help" (Ps. 146:3). The wise man also says (Ecclus. 2:18): "He who trusts in man shall fail." God does not, should not, and cannot tolerate it. It is idolatry that would rob God of His divinity.

If anyone wants to undertake something that is good, let him by all means begin it with God's help and wager on His goodness, never on human help and comfort. Nor should he fear men, not even the whole world; for this verse does not lie: "It is better to take refuge in the Lord." The wise man has said, Ecclus. 2:10–11: "Look at the generations of antiquity, and see. Who that put his trust in the Lord was ever put to shame?" And in Ps. 25:3 we read: "Yea, let none that wait for Thee be put to shame." Whoever cannot or will not wager on God and trust Him should give up and not undertake anything godly or wholesome with confidence in men. When I attacked indulgences for the first time, all the world was shocked and thought I had overreached myself. My prior and my subprior, moved by the hue and cry, came to me fearfully and begged me not to bring disgrace upon our order;²⁹ for the other orders, especially the preachers,³⁰ were jubilant that the Augustinians would now share their scorching and shameful disgrace. I replied: "Dear fathers, if this work has not been begun in God's name, then it will soon fail. But if it has been undertaken in His name, then leave it to Him (Acts 5:38–39)." They had nothing more to say. The work continues and, please God, will continue even better until the end. Amen.

I have heard a story about that noble bishop, Frederick of Magdeburg, who was also Count of Beichlingen not long ago.³¹ Duke Frederick of Saxony, his sworn enemy, was preparing to fight against him. He sent a spy to the bishop's court for the purpose of learning about his defense operations. The spy returned jubilantly to the Saxon prince and informed him that the bishop was making no preparations and that the victory was theirs. The prince asked: "What does the bishop say about the war?" The spy replied: "He says nothing more than this, that he is interested in discharging his duties, visiting the cloisters, and hearing the cases of the poor. He would let God fight for him, since He would take good care of the war." When the prince heard this, he said: "If this is what the bishop says, then let the devil fight him in my stead!" He gave up the war, for he was afraid to fight against God. Now who was it who helped the bishop so quickly and easily, and so completely changed the mind of the prince? Only the name of the Lord. The insignificant and the little word "God" accomplishes such great things

so quickly, so powerfully, and so easily. I shall not list the many examples of the enemies who were destroyed because they trusted in men. We see altogether too much of this every day.

Now our Lord is a God who permits the faithful to suffer and the ungodly to rage, but still does not forsake the pious in their need, and finally overthrows the monsters and rescues His own. In these verses, therefore, the psalmist would use his own example and experience to admonish and encourage us to trust and hope in God, as the First Commandment teaches. Such trust is good, noble, and wholesome here in time and hereafter in eternity. It is the most acceptable offering to God and the finest service and honor we can render Him. Furthermore, the psalmist wants to deter us; he wants to warn us in a straightforward manner against placing our trust, hope, boast, and reliance in men and princes, as the children and servants of the world and the devil do, who despise and reject God and violate the First Commandment. This is evil, shameful, and destructive, here in time and hereafter in eternity. Besides, it is the greatest dishonor, contempt, and robbery of God.

But let no sectarian presume to draw from this beautiful rose of the holy prophet the poisonous teaching that we should kill princes and despise or disobey government. Here David teaches that we should not place our confidence even in pious princes, whom he calls *בְּנֵי־מַלְכִּים*, which Christ translates as “benefactors” (Luke 22:25). In their office of doing much good they have been ordained by God, as is abundantly shown elsewhere.³² We should use and enjoy the princely office and temporal government for food, protection, and peace on earth, as God instituted it. But we should not rely, trust, hope, and boast in them. We must use other temporal goods, money, cattle, houses, homes; but we must not place our trust, hope, and confidence in them. To trust and to use are two different things. The former is appropriate to God; the latter is appropriate to creatures.

10. All nations surrounded me; in the name of the Lord I cut them off!

11. They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; in the name of the Lord I cut them off!

12. They surrounded me like bees; they were extinguished like a fire of thorns; in the name of the Lord I cut them off!

13. I was pushed hard, so that I was falling; but the Lord helped me.

In these four verses the psalmist relates who it is that persecutes him and from what source the trouble comes to which he has referred above. By his own example he wants to show convincingly the fine teaching and admonition by which he calls on us to put our confidence in God and not in men. It is as if he were saying: “I want to show you by my own example and experience, so that you may see how good it is to trust in God and beware of trusting in men. All the heathen, with their great power, zeal, wrath, fury, cunning, and treachery, have attacked me from all sides. But in spite of their raging fury they have accomplished nothing. It has served only to prove and confirm that God comforts, sustains, and strengthens the faithful in all their troubles by His Word and Spirit, and does not forsake them. He smashes and destroys the adversaries and thus finally helps us out of trouble and rescues us.”

Whether the prophet is speaking here of himself personally or of Christendom—as some claim because he says: “All nations surrounded me”—in general, is of no concern to me.³³ His example applies to all the saints, whether before or after Christ. However, I assume that he refers to himself and to his people, since at the beginning of the psalm he speaks of Israel and Aaron. An the surrounding heathen hated the Jewish kingdom beyond measure. They attacked and tormented it wherever possible from all sides, especially in the days of David. However, David did not fail but confidently laid about him and valiantly fought them, until by God’s command and with God’s help he overcame and defeated them. Thus he says: “In the name of the Lord I cut them off!” He is an example for all believers, who also suffer and finally conquer, no longer by the sword but by the Word of God; for Christendom does not fight with a physical sword.

How great the danger is, and how numerous the enemy! He says first, that “all nations,” with their mighty host, are arrayed against this small group. Thus it must be, that all must combine against God and His Word, in order to show conclusively that trust in, and reliance on, man is nothing before God. Ps. 2:2 says: “The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and His Anointed.” Man can tolerate unopposed other doctrines and gods, and no land or nation will object. But let the Word of God appear, and all the world is up in arms. Then there is rage and fury from all sides, and this is true: “They surrounded me, only me. I, I alone, am the one to be surrounded.” The Romans could bear their several hundred gods; only Christ they could not tolerate.³⁴ In our day the

people tolerated all the teachings of the monks and the priests, no matter how infamous, even though they sucked the world dry and were a pain and torture for body and soul. But when the Word of God comes and teaches only grace and peace and delivers from oppression, everybody resorts to attack, blasphemy, and persecution. Why? The psalmist says: "They have nothing else to do than to surround me, me, because I have the Word. The devil must turn against me." It is as Christ says: "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:19).

In the second place, the enemies are not only numerous; but they also use their power with all their might, persistency, diligence, and effort. Twice in verse eleven the psalmist says: "They surrounded me; they surrounded me." He shows by these words how they persist and press forward, never relenting or growing tired. They drive themselves incessantly, until they ruin themselves. Though they frequently fail, they are not concerned. They try one plot after another, one undertaking after another. Their god, the devil, goads them on and does not let them rest or relax as long as they can move. The devil instigates all heathen attacks against Christ and His Word. Were such attacks a mere human undertaking, the enemies would soon tire and give up in disgust, especially when they realized that they had often attacked only to fail and be disgraced, as always happens to such persecutors.

Thirdly, they are not only serious, active, and restless but most vehement, bitter, hateful, and malicious; and this makes them still more restless. Again, their wasted commotion and vain fury, the fact they do not accomplish as much as quickly as they like but often fail and must give up many a plan and project, makes them the more furious and vehement. The more they fail, and the longer the delay, the more frantic they become. Although failure should lead them to repentance, one vice whets another, and one transgression sharpens another. Restlessness makes them furious, and fury makes them restless. As the devil goads and drives them on, they scramble and storm and bluster in his service. They cannot cease or pause. For this reason the psalmist says here: "They surrounded me like bees." A bee is an angry and impetuous little insect. When a bee is angry, it sinks its sting into its enemy and leaves it there, without considering that it dies by this act or can never make any more honey. For if a bee loses its sting, it stops making honey, even if it survives. Because of its anger and its vengeful spirit it loses, in a shameful way, its noble, sweet trade. Henceforth it must be a water carrier for the other bees. Otherwise it could not eat with them. Among the other bees it is now a servant in the house.³⁵

The enemies of Christ are equally vindictive and spiteful. They would rather perish than fail to do damage or get revenge. They lose forever all grace to do good and to become true Christians. Their wings buzz and whirl as they plunge their sting into Christ. They cool their fury with their own eternal harm and destruction. Ps. 8:2 calls them avengers and says: "By the mouths of babes and infants Thou hast founded a bulwark because of Thy foes, to still the enemy and the avenger." It is a strange and inhuman revenge, simply devilish because it is so unreasonable. The Word of God does them no harm but rather brings and offers them every good, grace, peace, welfare, life, and salvation. However, as said before, such lust for revenge is provoked by their failure and inability to do what they want to do and to do it when and how they please. This frustrated and blocked restlessness and wickedness inflames them to such devilish revenge.

In the fourth place, since they must be deeply ashamed at their repeated failure and realize that they have no reason for being angry, furious, and vindictive, they mask and camouflage themselves. They forge a case, and argue that the Word of God causes sedition and is detrimental to the peace of the community. Having covered their shame, they no longer feel disgraced in the face of repeated failure and futility. Now they boastfully claim that the devil hinders them in their godly and pious undertaking. Now, as true children of God, they have an important and honest reason for anger, fury, murder, and revenge. They do God a great service when they maintain peace and unity and punish the rebels and the blasphemers. In such a manner poor Christ is shamefully and wickedly betrayed. How can He penetrate their masquerade and see that they are rascals and scoundrels at heart, especially since they put on such a fine front?³⁶ Surely, He must canonize them! Without a doubt He is so naive and simple compared with these eminently wise people! The members of the council in Jerusalem acted in a similar manner when they had determined to kill the Son of God. They had often failed, had grown more and more furious, and still had no reason for their anger or their plot. Then Mr. Caiaphas, the high priest, attempted to trick God by saying (John 11:49–50): "You know nothing at all; you do not understand that

it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.” What was God, the poor soul, to do? He simply had to go along with the masquerade and believe Caiaphas. It was only proper for Him to crucify His innocent Son that peace and unity might continue and His people might not perish, as Mr. Caiaphas thundered and prophesied.

Therefore the psalmist states in verse twelve: “They were extinguished like a fire of thorns.” When the hedges or fences in a field catch fire, everyone must run to help extinguish, quench, and save, as in an epidemic and a public calamity, lest the fire attack the grain in the field, the vineyard and gardens, and destroy the land and its people. Moses gave the Jews specific legislation regarding the punishment and fine of one guilty of starting a fire in a hedge of thorns around fields, vineyards, and gardens (Ex. 22:6). This applies also to a fire in the forest, on the prairie, or on a wood lot; and whoever runs to put it out does a good and praiseworthy deed. Now the psalmist says that God’s enemies compare their ranting and raving to this running to a fire. When anyone teaches the Word of God, he has, as we say in German, set fire to the Rhine; or, as the Hebrew puts it, he has set fire to the fences and the hedges. When this happens, everyone must come running to quench the fire, to kill the heretics and the rebels, to defend and save God’s honor and people. This supplies a good and even an honorable and laudable reason for murder and for raging against God. If they fail, they have the double distinction of being holy martyrs in a good work and of suffering great opposition on the part of the devil. What an excellent recipe for hardening a heart and making it impenitent!

Now you can see who throws fear into the faithful and creates affliction for them so that it is necessary for them to call upon the Lord.

1. Their number is large; it embraces all the heathen and all their might, the world and all the devils.
2. They are vehement, determined, and restless, not lazy or sluggish.
3. They are bitter, hateful, and furious; and they leave no hope of grace or reconciliation.
4. Finally, they are the greatest saints in heaven and the most pious people on earth.

Now what did the artist who thus painted these persecutors possibly omit? Which one of these four points would not be enough by itself to harm Christians and fill them with fear? With Christians the opposite is true on all four counts. First, they are alone and few; secondly, they are weak and feeble; thirdly, they are gentle and patient; fourthly, they are the worst heretics in hell and the most dangerous people on earth.

How can a Christian resist such enemies? Where is the victory for which he may hope? All appears to be lost, for they are superior. Our victory, however, lies here: “In the name of the Lord I cut them off.” That is the Christian’s reply to the four points. With one weapon he will meet them all. Now this is simply too much! This proud soul not only wants to be defended and rescued, but he also wants to subdue the whole world, with its power, wrath, and holiness! Subdue? No, he wants to crush the world with one weapon! If the devil and all his angry underlings only knew this, they would really be worried! What kind of gun or sword will you, sorry pride, use for this feat? I would like to hear this cannon or songstress! It must be a powerful piece! He says: I will tell you. It is called *the name of the Lord*.³⁷ “Oh, this is a paper cannon, a paper bag,” says the boaster. “Then let it be paper; you’ll see!” “How do you load it? How do you discharge it? What makes it shoot? What kind of ammunition does it use?”

In the first place, we know that God is almighty and that, compared with Him, all the heathen are nothing, as the First Commandment shows. This is the first point. Secondly, He would no more permit His name to remain in disgrace than He would forfeit His divinity. In the Second Commandment He has declared that He will not let His name be used in vain or let this sin go unpunished. This is the second point. When we now honor His name and call upon it, and our enemies malign us on this account, whom are they really persecuting and maligning? Is it not God Almighty Himself, and His name? Do you not see the gun being loaded? Since God will not suffer His name to be blasphemed, and we still pray and ask that it be hallowed and honored, don’t you believe that this prayer will discharge the gun? And the bullet? Perhaps it will be the Turk or some other sentence or plague of God, bringing death and destruction. The explosion will cause princes, bishops, lords, priests, lackeys, and monks to lie down and scream so that it will re-echo in heaven and resound on earth. They are asking for it. He shot the obstinate Jews with the Romans, the Romans with the Goths and the Wends, the Chaldeans with the Persians, and the Greeks with the Turks. He will also find a bullet for us Germans, to hit us and not miss; for we have pushed things too far and still refuse to quit.

This means that we Christians crush the heathen through our prayers, while God actually does it for the sake of His name, which we use and honor. Whenever we do anything as a result of someone else's advice, command, or request, it is actually done by him who advised, commanded, or requested it; this is a universal rule.³⁸ Therefore we can say in good conscience: "I shall crush the world"; that is, I will confidently ask God to hallow His name. Then I have already done it, for He will hear me, as this psalm says (v. 5): "The Lord answered me." Thus David, who slew his enemies with a physical sword, did not do this with the power of the sword, as he testifies in Ps. 18 and elsewhere. When he honored, hallowed, and invoked the name of God and prayed for the sake of God's glory, his sword became more than a hundred thousand swords. The name of the Lord is effective if we honor and call upon it. And even though we fail to call upon His name, it is still effective. Of course, there will be no benefit or meaning for us, since we are not interested and do not call upon it. He punishes the heathen, even though this brings no deliverance to the faithful, as the Romans destroyed one another and thereby carried out His sentence.

You say that you praise the name of the Lord. But the other side also claims to honor God's name and serve Him, as already said. Here is the crucial issue. Who uses the name of God properly? Your words alone mean nothing. First, listen to your conscience; it cannot deceive God. Next, to guard against deceiving men, consider the fruits; and then you can judge if the tree is good. We, on our side, have no confidence in men, nor can we have; for we are too little, too few, and too weak. We must walk in fear, anxiety, and danger. We must humbly plead with God and man. We murder no one because of his doctrine, nor do we rob anyone; but we permit him to believe what he pleases. We do not use force or compulsion, but we let the government judge and punish insurrection, strife, and dissension. We do not scheme and plot harm against anyone, but we prevent this where we can. We diligently keep and promote peace; and we suffer murder, bloodshed, poverty, and persecution. All this is evidence of the proper spirit and is in harmony with this psalm and with all Scripture.

Our opponents, however, trust and rely on men and their help, on emperors and princes. They feel secure, free from care and danger, afraid neither of us nor of any man. They do not call on God, much less humble themselves before man. They are proud, secure, and arrogant; and they force and drive men to believe what they demand. They resort to murder, torture, robbery, and exile without measure. They plot and plan most zealously by day and night how they may inflict hurt and harm, cause damage and create unrest. It is obvious that they neither can nor will have peace. Such behavior cannot be the fruit of a proper spirit; it is contrary to all Scripture. You can never prove that a Christian should commit murder, or even kill by law, or aid and abet such a thing. This is the function of the temporal government and belongs to earthly affairs, as even the pagan Gallio admitted (Acts 18:14–15). Christians have another law, judgment, and punishment (Matt. 18:15–17).

Moreover, we are concerned that unchastity and disorderly conduct be rebuked and not tolerated. Concubinage, fornication, blasphemy, and cursing are, praise God, decreasing. Marriage is honored, and our beloved youth are being trained well and with all diligence in the Word of God and Christian discipline. Among the papists, however, we see the most shameful, licentious, and disgraceful avarice and pride, an offense to all the world. It is worst among the upper classes, where there is no shame or punishment. Precious young people are neglected and allowed to go to rack and ruin. They are taught neither to believe nor to pray. Their teachers do not know how themselves and are ashamed to accept our instruction or example. Therefore it remains undone.

But now comes the crowning sin. We are not ashamed to confess, to the glory of God, our former errors of unbelief and abuse of God's Word; and we neither hide nor disguise our sin. They, however, only conceal, mask, camouflage, and gild theirs. By their ranting, arrogance, and blasphemy against us they try to make us blind to the logs in their eyes and aware and critical of the specks that are in ours (Matt. 7:3). They know and believe that in many things our teachings are superior to theirs.³⁹ They are well aware of their shameful commercializing of the Mass. They know how abominably popes, cardinals, bishops, canons, and priests have infested the world with vice, avarice, fornication, and pride, with their false teachings of indulgences, purgatory, pilgrimages, and similar flagrant abominations. All this they cover up, and not one of them would confess his error and reject it to the honor of God. We have the example of the preaching monks at Bern;⁴⁰ they go on in their smug impenitence and entertain no thought of repentance or improvement but are inflamed against us. We should die, and their

shameful, false, and wicked life survive and be vindicated. That is sin against the Holy Spirit. Everyone can see from their fruits how seriously they take God's name. So much on verses ten, eleven, and twelve.

Verse thirteen now describes what these numerous, powerful, angry, and holy heathen accomplish with their siege and persecution, and how far they actually get: "I was pushed hard, so that I was falling." That is to say: "They want to do me in and destroy me, so that nothing remains. They want to exterminate me root and stem, as Jeremiah threatens his people (11:19). Well, that they push me around and exile me is a matter of force, and this they can do. But still God preserves me from their designs and limits them, so that they cannot do what they intend. They can push, but they cannot knock down. They can use torture, but they cannot exterminate. They can put me in stocks, but they cannot compel. They can hinder, but they cannot prevent. They can show their teeth, but they cannot devour. They can murder by burning, hanging, and drowning; but they cannot subdue. They can exile, rob, and pillage; but they cannot silence. In short, they shall do something, but their heart's desire they shall not accomplish." They are limited by these words: "The Lord helped me." Who can succeed against the Lord? This will stand: God's Word endures forever (Is. 40:8), unless God and His name no longer abide. Let them rage and rave.

14. The Lord is my Strength and my Song; He has become my Salvation.

Having listed the miracles with which God comforts and helps His people, the psalmist joyfully breaks into a short but beautiful song of praise and thanksgiving to spite, mock, and scorn his persecutors and to glorify and honor God. Whether they want to or not, they must hear that he and his God remain and survive despite their raging and blustering. It is the same song that Moses sings in defiance of the drowned Pharaoh (Ex. 15:2). Isaiah also sings it (12:2). Apparently this was a common song and proverb among the Children of Israel. Surely it deserves to be a common song and formula of praise among us also whenever we are delivered from troubles. While we have often sung it after deliverance in the past, we shall sing it more frequently in the future, even to the end. Amen.

Note the fine, threefold summary of the psalmist: The Lord is "my Strength," "my Song," "my Salvation." The first indicates that he trusts wholly and completely in God, that God does, speaks, and quickens everything in him; and he will not boast of his own power, ability, knowledge, wisdom, holiness, or deeds. He will be nothing; in him God will be all and do all. What a sublime song and how rare in this world! He trusts and relies on no man or prince, on none of this world's power, wealth, friends, alliances, support, wisdom, deeds, comfort, or help. He trusts in God alone, in contrast to himself and all the world's might, wisdom, and holiness. This is expressed even more impressively in the song: God alone shall be his strength, trust, and defiance. Next, the psalmist cannot keep still about this. He turns it into a psalm and sings; he preaches, teaches, confesses, and declares what he believes about God. Faith cannot do otherwise; it always confesses what it believes (Rom. 10:10). The world cannot bear to hear that its power and wisdom, its holiness and piety, its counsel and deeds, are condemned and rejected, that the help and trust of men and princes should be cast out and despised, and their teaching be held vain and false. The singer of this psalm is taken to task because, as is said, his psalm does not praise God, his preaching does not honor God, his confession does not declare the truth; but that it is all blasphemy, heresy, error, lies, rebellion, and a delusion of the world, the most shameful song on earth and the most dangerous teaching under the sun. To the dungeon with him! Burn him, exile him, curse and damn him! Kill, burn, drown, hang, murder, and confound him as a great service to God! In the third place, God is his salvation and will not utterly abandon the singer and his song. God helps him in life and death and grants him victory. Though all the gates of hell and the whole world rage and rave, God, in the end, will be our salvation; we and our psalm and teaching shall survive, and all the adversaries shall founder. The Word of God abides forever. No amount of raging, blustering, blasphemy, or cursing will change this.

The psalmist, therefore, draws a fine contrast. It is like this: "The strength of the enemies lies in themselves; it is the strength of men and princes, in whom they trust, as said before. But my strength, in which I trust, is the Lord. He who is the source of strength deserves the psalm, the praise and thanks, glory and honor. They must praise, honor, and glorify their gods, namely, themselves, men and princes. This they do, openly and unabashed. Their noblest work and worship is to rob and deprive God of the sacrifice of praise and blasphemously to divert and offer it to miserable mortals. O let us really heap

scorn on those wretched and obstinate souls who have such miserable gods and must worship a bag of worms⁴¹ and a stinkpot without a chance of help. Just as their strength and their song, that is, their trust and boast, go down in defeat, so there is no help or victory for them, but only failure and destruction. Ps. 146 tells us that help is never found in men. My victory and salvation lie in the Lord, who can and does help. Here salvation is to be taken as victory or help. In His name and Word God lets us gain ultimate victory. He helps us overcome and hold the field, while our persecutors perish and go down in disgrace.

15. *Hark, glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: The right hand of the Lord does valiantly.*

The psalmist has finished speaking and singing about his own example, about God's help in his life. He now proceeds to the common example of all the saints. He says that all the righteous are persecuted for the sake of God and His Word. Because they trust in God and do not depend on men, God helps them, so that they also sing such a song and praise Him. Thus Moses and the Children of Israel sang (Ex. 15:1 ff.); likewise Deborah (Judg. 5:1 ff.) and Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1 ff.), and all the rest. It is a unanimous chorus. When I look at all the saints, especially in the New Testament, the story is the same. I can hear voices of rejoicing in their tabernacles, joyous songs and hymns of salvation and victory, of the help of God. And we sing along and join in the praise and thanks, just as we are one in our faith and trust in God and also share in suffering. St. Peter comforts us: "Knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world" (1 Peter 5:9).

Were it not a special consolation to know and observe that this is the lot of all the saints, St. Peter would not have made this application, and this psalm would not have spoken of it so emphatically. It must comfort and strengthen my heart when I see that St. Paul and the apostles had the same Word, God, faith, and cross as I do. The saying goes: "Misery loves company."⁴² It is a comfort to the poor if they do not suffer alone. This is, for one thing, an excellent proverb if it is used properly and applied to Christians. It is frightening for a man with a special affliction to feel himself marked out for this distinctive suffering before all other men. Again, it is comforting when many suffer the same thing; for then a man does not get the horrible thought that he alone has been winnowed out and rejected. But still more comforting is it when all suffer the same and no one is exempt, as is the case among Christians.

This psalm, however, does not speak here of the suffering of the righteous but of victory and rejoicing, for the purpose of increasing our comfort as we see before us the happy picture of the redeemed and are confident that in the end we shall be able to sing as joyously as they. Nevertheless, the psalmist indicates the sufferings of the righteous with the word "salvation" and subsequently with other words, pointing out that the righteous have suffered sorely and fought valiantly in the fight of faith. Otherwise there would be no talk of salvation and victory, or such a song of joy. But now, as suffering abounds—and Paul tells us that the sufferings of Christ in us are many (2 Cor. 1:5)—there is a great deal of salvation and victory, singing and rejoicing, praise and thanks among the righteous. Therefore I hold that it must be apparent to all that in Scripture "the righteous" are the believers who trust in God. "He who through faith is righteous shall live" (Rom. 1:17). On the other hand, he who trusts princes and men is wicked and an unbeliever. Therefore in their tabernacles there is no joyful song of salvation and victory, but crying, reviling, blaspheming, and cursing God, followed by howling, wailing, and the gnashing of teeth (Matt. 22:13) in hell. And what song of joy and praise do the righteous sing in their tabernacles? It is this: "The right hand of the Lord does valiantly."

16. *The right hand of the Lord is exalted, the right hand of the Lord does valiantly!*

17. *I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.*

18. *The Lord has chastened me sorely, but He has not given me over to death.*

This is the joyful song of the righteous. It is sung by all the saints in their tabernacles, that is, where they gather and dwell. The psalmist refers especially to the righteous in the New Testament, where throughout the churches the Gospel of Christ's great miracles is preached. Mark well, this is a song of the righteous, of the believers, not of the godless. For he who does not believe but puts his trust in men cannot sing this song; nor can he understand a word of it, though he may prattle it in cathedrals and cloisters, where Sunday after Sunday this beautiful song is shamefully mistreated and mutilated.⁴³ The godless sing in their hearts: "The right hand of man does valiantly; the right hand of princes is exalted." For they must sing as they have been trained. Kind does not vary from kind.⁴⁴

Under "singing" I include not only making melody or shouting but also every sermon or public confession by which God's work, counsel, grace, help, comfort, victory, and salvation are glorified

before the world. The Holy Spirit refers to such singing wherever in the Psalter and the Scriptures songs, hymns, and psalms are mentioned. As verse fourteen puts it: "The Lord is my Strength and my Song; He has become my Salvation." God wants to be praised, glorified, honored, and confessed by us in His works and wonders. Faith does this, for faith cannot be silent but must say and teach what it believes and knows about God, to the glory of God and the instruction of man, as Ps. 116:10 says: "I believed, therefore have I spoken."⁴⁵ If faith did not break forth, speak up, and confess, it would not be a true faith, even though it has to suffer and be cursed and persecuted, as the same psalm continues: "I was greatly afflicted." But faith has a Helper who is its Salvation. Verse fourteen teaches that such persecution does not harm our salvation but must promote it; for it defies and blasphemes God, so that He is driven to help, and the righteous are compelled to call on God and to pray to Him. Thus everything turns out just fine.

On the basis of verse fourteen, which we explained above, we can thoroughly understand the whole song of the righteous; for it is in complete harmony with this verse. In their assembly the righteous do not sing, teach, preach, confess, or glorify man's works, holiness, and wisdom, or the power, consolation, and help of princes, as the hypocrites, the proud, the self-sufficient saints, and the godless, apostate Christians do in their assembly. They reject and despise such stinking self-righteousness and such ineffective help and consolation of men, princes, and the world. They praise only God's grace, works, words, and power as they are revealed to them in Christ. This is their sermon and song, their hymn of praise. This verse distinctly sets "the right hand of God" in contrast with "the right hand of man," in order that we may know that nothing that the hand of man can accomplish avails before God. The work of man contributes nothing to righteousness, does not remove sin or produce a good work, knows and understands nothing of the truth and the real nature of salvation. Much less can it counsel and help in trouble, danger, death, and hell. It cannot give life and salvation.

The right hand of God, however, does this. First, it does valiantly. This strength and its comfort were explained above, but it requires a little more explaining here. This is the power of God, that whoever believes and trusts in Him is thereby delivered from all sins, from a guilty conscience, a sorrowing heart, error, lies, deception, darkness, and all the power of the devil, and is led to grace, righteousness, truth, understanding, consolation, and the true light. As a result, God is our power. We do not live in ourselves but in Him, and He acts and speaks all things in us. These are all great, mighty, divine works and miracles, none of which human reason, power, and might can comprehend, much less help to accomplish. As a result, they are led astray by false comfort, preaching, and promises. And the longer it goes on, the deeper they are driven into error, although before the world their case looks good and gives the appearance of being real power and of quickly bringing them to heaven. He, however, who believes in the power of God recognizes it as nothing but the work of man, a rotten, ineffective, and vain delusion. Whoever relies on this, builds himself a hell.

Secondly, the right hand is exalted, soars high, overcomes, and always gains the victory. That is to say: Believers not only have this consolation from God, that they are rid of their sins and righteous before Him; they also receive help from Him, so that they finally overcome the devil, man, and the world, and are thus delivered from death, hell, and every evil. They do not need the help of men or princes; for this is unnecessary, nor could it perform such great works and miracles. The great and glorious hand of God performs such exalted miracles and helps us in every need. And if we die, His hand will really lead us to a life that has no end. God's right hand is so exalted that neither tribulation nor distress, neither sword nor famine, neither angels nor princes can pull it down (Rom. 8:35–39). If we cling to it with a firm faith, as all the righteous do, we are just as exalted; and neither tribulation nor distress, nor prince, nor devil, neither fire nor water nor any other creature can subdue us. Victory will be ours. But whoever relies on the arm of man and puts his confidence in the hand of princes must plunge into the abyss of hell, though he were sailing above the clouds or sitting in heaven.

Thirdly, the psalmist restates his first point and says: "The right hand of the Lord does valiantly!" A good song is worth singing twice. It is customary for people, when they are really happy or joyful, to repeat a word two or three times. They cannot say it often enough, and whoever meets them must hear it. This is the case here, that the dear saints are so happy and joyful over the miracles God does for them when He delivers them from sin and death, that is, from every evil of body and soul, that out of sheer joy they sing their song over and over again: "The hand of the Lord does valiantly; indeed, valiantly does

the hand of the Lord. Nothing but the right hand of God can help or comfort.” Oh, what can the ungodly do, who rely on themselves, trust in their own work and wisdom, and build and rest on the comfort and help of men and princes?

Whoever will, let him apply these three points to the threefold work of Christ, in that He redeems us from the Law, from sin, and from death. This threefold redemption is enumerated in Is. 9:4 and in I Cor. 15:55.⁴⁶ As I have said, however, the important thing is to realize that these words are wholly spiritual and must be heard, sung, and understood by faith. He who gapes at these words open-mouthed and uses his reason and natural eyes will take offense and will consider only the opposite in the righteous and the holy. In the eyes of the world, they are nothing but the devil’s own; no one is less righteous and holy, no one a greater sinner and heretic, no one damned deeper into hell, than the righteous. In the eyes of the unbeliever the devil’s right hand is the right hand of the righteous. But those on the opposite side—they alone are holy and blessed. For them the right hand of God does valiantly, soars high, is victorious and exalted. For they are the children of God, and no one else.

Verse seventeen of the psalm (“I shall not die, but I shall live”) touches and states the trouble out of which God’s hand delivers the righteous, namely, death. The righteous surely feel death when they are in mortal danger. Meeting death eye to eye is not a pleasant draught for the flesh. Death always appears in the company of sin and the Law. One readily understands that the saints are really martyrs, for they must live under the threat of death and wrestle and fight with death. If it does not involve tyrants and the ungodly, with fire, sword, prison, and similar persecutions, it involves the devil himself. He can tolerate neither the Word of God nor those who keep and teach it. He besets them in life and in death. While the faithful are alive, he uses great attacks on their faith, hope, and love toward God. He beleaguers and storms a heart with fear, doubt, and despair until it shies away from God, hates and blasphemes Him, and the wretched conscience believes that God, the devil, death, sin, hell, and all creatures are one and have united as its eternal and relentless enemy.⁴⁷ Neither the Turk nor the emperor can ever storm a city with such power as the devil uses in attacking a conscience.

If God permits, the devil can do this also in death or on the deathbed. There he is a master at puffing up sin and pointing to God’s wrath. He is a strange and powerful creature who out of one sin can foment such fear and conjure up such a hell. It is true that no human being ever sees his real sins, namely, unbelief, contempt of God’s Word, the failure to fear, love, and trust God as he should, and similar sins of the heart, which are the chief transgressions. Nor would it be good for him to see them, for I do not know if there is a faith on earth that could endure it without falling and despairing. For this reason God lets the devil operate with our sins of commission. He easily creates hell and damnation for you because you take one drink too many or sleep too long, and soon you become sick with conscience scruples and despondency and practically die of grief.

What is worse, the devil takes your best works and drives and plunges them into your conscience as worthless and condemned, so that all your sins do not frighten you as much as your best works, which are really quite good, and you wish you had done nothing but great sins instead of these works. He wants you to disown them as not having been done by God, and thus to blaspheme God as well. Then death and hell are not far away. But who can list all the tricks by which the devil invokes sin, death, and hell? This is his trade. He has been at it for more than five thousand years, and he is a past master at it. That long he has been the prince of death. He has experimented and practiced thoroughly how to give a poor conscience the foretaste of death. The prophets, especially our dear David, have felt and tasted his power. For they certainly complain, teach, and talk about it as if they had often been there, speaking now of the gates of death, now of hell, now of the wrath of God.

Well, no matter when or how it happens, we learn here that the saints must wrestle with the devil and fight with death, whether by persecution or pestilence or other sickness and mortal danger. In that conflict nothing is better and more vital for victory than learning to sing this little song of the saints, that is, to look away from self and to cling to the hand of God. Thus the devil is defrauded and made to miss the boat.⁴⁸ It works like this: I am nothing. The Lord is all my strength, as stated above. I am stripped of everything, of myself and all that is mine. I can say: “Devil, what are you fighting? If you try to denounce my good works and my holiness before God, why, I have none. My strength is not my own; the Lord is my Strength. You can’t squeeze blood out of a turnip! If you try to prosecute my sins, I have

none of those either. Here is God's strength—prosecute it until you have had enough. I know absolutely nothing about either sins or holiness in me. I know nothing whatever except God's power in me."

It would be fine, I hold, if a man could forget about himself and mock the devil with an empty pocket as a certain poor householder mocked a thief whom he caught in his home one night. He said: "You silly thief, do you expect to find something here in the dark when I can't find anything in broad daylight?" What can the devil do when he finds a soul so naked that it can respond neither to sin nor to holiness? He must give up all his skill, both to puff up sin and to decry good works. He is referred to the right hand of God, and he must by all means let it alone. But if you forget this prescription and he seizes you in your sins and good works, and you begin to argue with him, to observe and hear him, then he will shape you to suit himself; and you will forget and forfeit God, His right hand, and everything.

As we have heard, it is an art to forget self. We must keep learning this lesson as long as we live, even as all the saints before us, with us, and after us must do. Just as we still feel sin, we must also feel death. Just as we must fight to rid ourselves of sin by clinging to God's right hand as His Word offers it to us, so we must also battle with death and death's prince or chief, the devil, until we are free. See how this verse presents the conflict. The devil, or pursuer, presses in on the saints with death. How do they react? They turn away their eyes, yes, their entire bodies. Emptying themselves, they cling to God's hand and say: "Devil and tyrant, I shall not die, as you pretend. You lie! I shall live, for I will not speak of my own works or those of any man. I know nothing about myself or my own holiness. I have before me only the works of the Lord. Of them I will speak; them I will glorify; on them I will rely. He it is who delivers from sin and death. If you can overthrow His works, you have overthrown me too."

This verse then emphasizes the two points mentioned above in verses six and seven: comfort and help, with which God blesses the pious and the righteous. Here you see how the right hand of God mightily lifts the heart and comforts it in the midst of death, so that it can say: "Though I die, I die not. Though I suffer, I suffer not. Though I fall, I am not down. Though I am disgraced, I am not dishonored." This is the consolation. Furthermore, the psalmist says of the help: "I shall live." Isn't this an amazing help? The dying live; the suffering rejoice; the fallen rise; the disgraced are honored. It is as Christ says: "He who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). Paul speaks in a similar manner: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair" (2 Cor. 4:8). These are all words that no human heart can comprehend.

And here you see that this comfort and help is eternal life, which is the true, everlasting blessing of God. The entire psalm has this theme. Since the psalmist separates the pious from the other three groups⁴⁹ and yet gives to those groups everything belonging to this life on earth—temporal government and spiritual rule, the goods, benefit, and use of every creature—therefore of necessity the blessings of this small and pious group must be another life, namely, eternal life. Since the three groups begrudge and deny them their blessings in this life, their consolation must be eternal, and their help everlasting. How else can it be, since the psalmist glories in the Lord Himself over and above all the possessions of men and princes which the other groups have? The Lord is an eternal possession; therefore everyone can conclude that where the heart recognizes a gracious God, there must be forgiveness of sins. If sins are forgiven, death is gone. And without fail there must be the comfort and confidence of eternal righteousness and everlasting life.

We should recognize this verse as a masterpiece.⁵⁰ How mightily the psalmist banishes death out of sight! He will know nothing of dying and of sin. At the same time he visualizes life most vividly and will hear of nothing but life. But whoever will not see death, lives forever, as Christ says: "If anyone keeps My Word, he will never see death" (John 8:51). He so immerses himself in life that death is swallowed up by life (1 Cor. 15:55) and disappears completely, because he clings with a firm faith to the right hand of God. Thus all the saints have sung this verse and will continue to sing it to the end. We note this especially in the case of the martyrs. So far as the world is concerned, they die. Yet their hearts say with a firm faith: "I shall not die, but live."

At this point we should learn the rule that whenever in the Psalter and Holy Scripture the saints deal with God concerning comfort and help in their need, eternal life and the resurrection of the dead are involved.⁵¹ All such texts belong to the doctrine of the resurrection and eternal life, in fact, to the whole Third Article of the Creed with the doctrines of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Christian Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection, and everlasting life. And it all flows out of the First Commandment,

where God says: "I am your God" (Ex. 20:2). This the Third Article of the Creed emphasizes insistently. While Christians deplore the fact that they suffer and die in this life, they comfort themselves with another life than this, namely, that of God Himself, who is above and beyond this life. It is not possible that they should totally die and not live again in eternity. For one thing, the God on whom they rely and in whom they find their consolation cannot die, and thus they must live in Him. Besides, as Christ says, He is a God of the living, not of the dead and of those who are no more (Matt. 22:32). Therefore Christians must live forever; otherwise He would not be their God, nor could they depend on Him unless they live. For this little group, therefore, death remains no more than a sleep.

But if it is true that they live in God, then it must first be true that they have forgiveness of sin. If they have no sin, they surely have the Holy Spirit, who makes them holy. If they are holy, they are the true Holy Christian Church, the little flock; and they rule over all the power of the devil. Then one day they will rise again and live forever. These are the great and lofty works of the right hand of the Lord. Compared with them, what are the deeds of men and princes on which the entire world relies and of which it boasts? Isaiah calls them spider webs (59:5), fit neither to clothe nor to adorn anything. Only aimless and foolish gnats and flies, the frivolous souls, are caught by them and killed forever.

Now saints live not only in the life to come; they begin life now, by faith. And wherever there is faith, everlasting life has begun. And the texts in Scripture regarding faith also belong to all the doctrines listed above. The three groups we have discussed have no need of faith for this life, since the ungodly have this life most of all. Nor can faith attach itself or cling to anything that counts in this life; it breaks away and clings to that which is above and beyond this life, that is, to God Himself. This verse teaches that the saints begin this eternal life here and live even while dying: "I shall recount the deeds of the Lord." Whoever would tell of the Lord's work must certainly be alive. Though they are dead, their spirit and blood preach, even as Abel's blood cries out against Cain (Gen. 4:10). And in Heb. 11:4 we read that the departed Abel still speaks through his faith.

This is the worst and most discouraging text for tyrants and for murderers of the saints. I hardly know of another verse in Scripture to the effect that the saints, whom they believe to be silenced and suppressed, are just beginning to live and to speak. "What the devil!"⁵² There is no use in arguing with the saints if after death they begin really to do that for which they were killed! They will never cease or desist. They remain unkilld and unsilenced, and proclaim forever the works of the Lord." The pope burned John Hus and many other saints, only recently Leonhard Kaiser and many others.⁵³ But he was so successful in silencing them that their blood now cries out against him until he has lost all his power. Now he must go begging and call on other powers, such as emperors and princes, whom he once arbitrarily trod underfoot.⁵⁴ If it were not for them, the poor beggar would have been eaten by moths long ago; and even now such help avails him little and will eventually fail him. He must concede that John Hus is his master.

The eighteenth verse in this song is also a masterpiece. It uses the rhetorical devices of confutation, understatement, and interpretation.⁵⁵ It declares: "The Lord has chastened me sorely, but He has not given me over to death." What does this mean? He has boasted that he will not die, but live. Thereupon the flesh, world, men, and princes speak up and would weaken and discourage him: "Is it not death if you are burned, beheaded, drowned, strangled, condemned, and exiled? I would think that you could tell whether this can be called life. Where is your God? Let Him help you! Of course, Elias will come and take you down (Matt. 27:49)!" To this he replies unshaken, and he comforts himself thus: "On the contrary, this dying is nothing. It is only a fatherly rod, not wrath. It is only a foxtail, nothing serious. God is only chastising me as a dear father chastises his dear child. It may hurt a little, and it is not sugar; it is a rod. However, it does not kill, but rather helps me live." This is surely a good interpretation and an effective confutation, to make a benevolent rod out of the word "death." Only the Holy Spirit and the right hand of God can teach this art. It hurts beyond measure when to suffering there are added blasphemy, mockery, wagging of the head, and hostility, as the Jews did to Christ on the cross. Flesh and blood would do the opposite and turn a benevolent rod into death and hell, for it is ready to give up and despair if it lacks as much as a loaf of bread. This is poor interpretation.

It is a much greater art to be able to sing this verse when the devil, as he did to Job and many other saints, becomes so hostile that death appears. He can give the heart a most forceful picture of death. He does not simply say, as men would: "You shall be burned or drowned." He magnifies what a horrible,

abominable, eternal thing death is, and raps out the wrath of God. With overwhelming thoughts he drives and presses into the heart until it becomes unbearable and unendurable. Here a good interpreter is needed, one who can outshout the devil and overcome him by saying: “This is still not death, nor is it God’s wrath. It is gracious chastisement and fatherly punishment. I still know that He will not turn me over to death. I will not believe it is wrath, even though all the devils of hell were to affirm it in chorus. Were an angel from heaven to say this, let him be accursed (Gal. 1:8). Were God Himself to say it, I would still believe that He was trying me as He tried Abraham, merely feigning wrath, and not in earnest. For He does not take back His promise. Here is the truth: He chastises me, but He will not kill me. I insist on this and will not let anyone take it from me or explain, interpret, or expound it differently.”

He feels death, and yet he refuses to feel it or call it death but clings to the gracious right hand of God. He does not deny that God sends him death, but he and God have an understanding. Neither will call it death or let it be death; it is a father’s rod and a child’s chastisement. These are all lofty words that are not found in the hearts of men and princes; neither can they enter there, as St. Paul says: “We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God.... None of the rulers of this age understood this” (1 Cor. 2:7–8). Let these words on this beautiful song of the dear saints suffice for the moment. Next:

19. *Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.*

What? Has he not already thanked throughout the whole psalm, in one continuous thanksgiving? Why does he now ask that the gates be opened in order that he may give thanks? This is said in the spirit of the dear fathers in the Old Testament, who longed with all their hearts for the kingdom of Christ and the revelation of the Gospel, as his previous hymn prophesied.⁵⁶ He is actually praying: “O Lord God, would that I might be among the throng which shall sing such a song of the works and blessings of Christ, and that I could join in the thanking, praising, and preaching! How happy I would be! Who will open the gate for me and help me enter the place where the true, free, and joyful thanks and praise will really begin?” But now it is all still closed, and the Gospel and Christendom are not yet revealed, as Ps. 42:4 says: “I went with the throng and led them in procession into the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.”

Christ also tens His disciples (Luke 10:23–24): “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desire to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”

This verse of the psalm is a heartfelt prayer for the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ. It asks for the removal of the burden of the Law of Moses, of which Peter says (Acts 15:10) that neither our fathers nor we were able to bear it. The psalmist calls the New Testament “gates of righteousness” in the Hebrew sense; for there “gates” meant town halls, schools, synagogues, courthouses, or similar public places where public matters are handled in open assembly, as in Prov. 31:23: “Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land.” The word is often used like this here and there in the Old Testament. Accordingly, the gates of righteousness are nothing else than the parish or bishopric where the ministry of the church—preaching, praising God, thanksgiving, singing, baptizing, distributing and receiving the Sacrament, admonishing, comforting, praying, and whatever else pertains to salvation—is publicly exercised. There sit the councilors of the spiritual kingdom of Christ, pastors, preachers, bishops, teachers, and the rest of the clergy.

He calls the New Testament, in contradistinction to the Old, “gates of righteousness.” For in the New Testament there is nothing but the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins, of grace, of justifying and sanctifying faith, and nothing about the works of the Law or our own works. But the Law, in its administration and treatment, aims at works, creates sinners, and multiplies sin and wrath, as St. Paul says in Romans and in Galatians. It cannot contribute to righteousness. Therefore it may be called “gates of sin or of unrighteousness.” The Law is not grace. Since grace alone justifies, it is impossible for the Law to justify. It must make men sinners and incite wrath (Rom. 4:15). For this reason Paul boldly calls the Law of Moses “the dispensation of condemnation” (2. Cor. 3:9).⁵⁷ Again, he calls it “an agent of sin” (Gal. 2:17). Furthermore, he says that “the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law” (1 Cor. 15:56). Our present exponents of works—of whom the world is full—almost all bishops and clergy, belong into the Old Testament. They have closed these gates of righteousness and have converted them into gates of sin. They can do nothing so well as, by purely human ordinances, to load and perplex

consciences with false, unnecessary, imaginary sins, as Christ and the apostles foretold of them.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, a few gates of righteousness remain.

20. *This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.*

Just as in the preceding verse he separated the Old Testament from the New and abolished it so far as doctrine and preaching are concerned, so here he separates the one from the other in the matter of public worship. The Jews took inordinate pride in their worship and gloried in nothing but their holy temple and their sacrifices and incense, for which the whole priestly tribe of Levi had been appointed. Here, they said, here at Jerusalem is the Lord's temple; this is the true gate, where one must come before the Lord, sacrifice, burn incense, serve God, and become pious. The psalmist does not simply say "gates," but "gate of the Lord," the singular. He means the gate of the temple, where the Lord has His special residence as in a castle or town hall. Here the service of God is cultivated most thoroughly and frequently. But this is not the real temple, incense, and sacrifice. Here is the true temple, the true gate, the service of God, the true sacrifice, namely, the sacrifice of thanksgiving, of which he speaks in the next verse and again later.

Furthermore, hypocrites, scoundrels, and sinners entered the gate of that temple; but only the righteous and the saints enter this gate of the Lord in order to serve Him. For no one can enter the Christian congregation or be a member of Christendom unless he is a believer, that is, righteous and holy, as the article of the Creed says: "I believe in the Holy Christian Church." He who does not believe and is not holy and righteous, does not belong to the Holy Christian Church. He cannot enter this gate, cannot pray, offer thanks, praise, or serve God, and does not know God, even though he lives among Christians and may hold an office among Christians, such as pastor, preacher, or bishop, or outwardly partake of the Sacrament. 1 John 3:6 says: "No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has either seen Him or known Him." And again (1 John 3:8): "He who commits sin is of the devil."

This article was condemned at the estimable Council of Constance, together with this verse and all Holy Scriptures.⁵⁹ For at that time John Hus confessed that there is one Holy Christian Church and that if the pope were not pious and holy, he could not be a member of that holy church, much less its head, even though he might hold that office. For this Hus was burned and cursed as a heretic. Even more so is St. Peter cursed, for he calls such people "a blot and blemish" on the holy church (2 Peter 2:13). If he were still alive, the devil would detect him in these murders of the saints, and St. John likewise; for he plainly says (1 John 3:8): "He who commits sin is of the devil." The unrighteous counter by saying: "Although the pope, bishops, and others sin grievously, they do not belong to the devil and his synagog (Rev. 2:9). They belong to Christ and to God and are members and heads of holy Christendom." Verily, they are members of the church, just as spittle, snot, pus, sweat, excrement, urine, stench, mange, smallpox, boils, syphilis, and all diseases are members of the body. They are in and on the body, like blemishes and filth, which the body must bear with great danger, trouble, and unwillingness.

I hope that by this time almost everybody knows that whoever prides himself on being a Christian must also take pride in being holy and righteous. Since Christendom is holy, a Christian must also be righteous and holy, or he is not a Christian. All Scripture calls Christians holy and righteous, as does this verse, and as they are often called in Daniel (7:27). This is not boastfulness; it is a necessary confession and an article of faith. The papal hypocrites, with their false and blasphemous humility, glory in being sinners and do not want to be called holy. Nevertheless, they boast that their order, their rank, their rule, and their life are holy. Moreover, they represent their works as something sacred. They do not lie when they say they are sinners—if only they were serious and sincere; but they are not. They lie to themselves; they are sinners before God; their whole position is false. However, they will not admit it but pretend to be holy, while with their mouths they humble themselves as sinners. That is a double lie as well as blasphemy against God.

We must realize that in our persons as children of Adam we are damned sinners, without any righteousness or holiness of our own. However, since we are baptized and believe in Christ, we are holy and righteous in Christ and with Christ. He has taken our sin from us and has graced, clothed, and adorned us with His holiness. Thus the whole Christian Church is holy, not by itself or by its own work but in Christ and through Christ's holiness, as St. Paul says: "He has cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word" (Eph. 5:26).⁶⁰ Anyone who hesitates to boast and confess that he is holy and righteous, is actually saying: "I am not baptized. I am not a Christian. I do not believe in Christ. I do not

believe that Christ died for me. I do not believe that He took away my sins. I do not believe that His blood has cleansed me, or that it can cleanse me. In short, I do not believe a word of what God has declared of Christ and all Scripture testifies.” What kind of person thinks or says such things? What Turk or Jew is such a desperately wicked being? Now those who would be pious and saved by their works, such as the monks and priests and all popery, certainly think and believe thus. They deny Christ, as Peter (2 Peter 2:1) and Paul (Gal. 6:12) say.

The psalmist also refers to all other outward partiality, to the effect that in the Christian Church there is no respect of persons. Whoever believes and is righteous enters this gate, whether Jew or Greek, man or woman, virgin or married, servant or maid, rich or poor, king or prince or nobleman, townsman or peasant, strong or weak. The Jews prided themselves on being the seed of Abraham and on having the Law. They believed that this made them God’s favorites, just as today our clergy claim to be the best, and the nuns think they are special brides of Christ. But here it is stated that the righteous enter. Monks and nuns do not enter unless they first become righteous and Christian. Christ says that His kingdom does not consist of external ways and behavior (Luke 17:20). We cannot say: “It is here; it is there.” It is found in the heart. But it is hard to believe this is true; and that is one of the doctrines of the damned heretics.

21. I thank Thee that Thou hast humbled me and become my Salvation.

These are the sacrifices and the divine services that are performed by the righteous and by Christians in the gates of the Lord in the New Testament. They thank God and praise Him with preaching, teaching, singing, and confessing. These sacrifices are twofold. The one is our humility, of which David speaks (Ps. 51:17): “The sacrifice acceptable to God is the broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.” This is a great, broad, long, daily, and unending sacrifice. Here God corrects us through His Word in all our works and reduces our holiness, wisdom, and strength to nothing, so that before Him we are guilty sinners (Rom. 3:23). He gives His Word impressive power, frightens our conscience, and afflicts us with all kinds of troubles, so that our sinful old Adam⁶¹ becomes mellow and soft. Finally, by the time we die, our pride, trust, and confidence in our own efforts and knowledge are dead. Whoever can suffer and endure this and remain constant and persevere, and at the same time thank and praise God as one who sincerely means well, he it is who can sing this verse: “I thank Thee that Thou dost humble me.” He does not say: “The devil humbles me,” but: “Thou, Thou, art the one. It is Thy gracious will for my good. Without Thy will the devil could not do it.”

The other sacrifice is this, that when God again comforts and helps us, the spirit and the new man gain as the flesh and the old man wane. As time goes on, God gives us an ever greater and richer gift and helps us overcome and win, so that we rejoice before Him and in Him, as He says (Ps. 50:15, 14): “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me. Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High.”⁶² Whoever does so sings this verse: “I thank Thee that Thou art my Salvation, my Helper and Savior.” This also is an unending, great, and daily sacrifice of the righteous in the gate of the Lord. Here God rejects and discontinues all the sacrifices of the Old Testament, which were images and symbols of these thank offerings and which could be offered by both the pious and the wicked. These thank offerings, however, can be offered by no one except the pious and the righteous, or Christians. This is clear from history, when the Jews raged in the days of the apostles just as do the work-righteous of today, when their works and wisdom are rejected. They refuse to be humble, and they blaspheme instead of thanking. They revile, persecute, and murder, under the impression that their service must be a most acceptable offering to God (John 16:2).

This is a happy verse, singing out of pure joy: “Art Thou not a wonderful and delightful God, to govern us so amazingly and so kindly? Thou exaltest us when Thou humblest us. Thou makest us righteous when Thou makest us sinners. Thou leadest us to heaven when Thou castest us into hell. Thou grantest us the victory when Thou causest us to be defeated. Thou givest us life when Thou permittest us to be killed. Thou comfortest us when Thou causest us to mourn. Thou makest us to rejoice when Thou permittest us to weep. Thou makest us to sing when Thou causest us to cry. Thou makest us strong when we suffer. Thou makest us wise when Thou makest fools of us. Thou makest us rich when Thou sendest us poverty. Thou makest us masters when Thou permittest us to serve.” Innumerable are the wonders included in this verse; and all Christendom together praises God for them in these few short words: “I thank Thee that Thou hast humbled me, and hast helped me again.”

22. *The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief Cornerstone.*

Now the psalmist turns to the Head of holy Christendom and presents Him as an example. Since He was humbled and exalted as much as and more than all the saints, we should not deem it odd or strange if we also suffer tribulation and affliction. "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of His household? The servant is not better than his Master" (Matt. 10:24–25). In the verse before us the psalmist summarizes the sufferings and resurrection of Christ. By using the word "rejected" he indicates the suffering, death, disgrace, and reproach to which Christ was subjected. By using "the chief Cornerstone" he indicates His resurrection, life, and eternal dominion. He uses the parable of a building. When a stone does not fit into the wall or match the others, but disfigures the whole building and is an unfit, useless stone, it must be rejected. Then another builder, a stranger, comes along. He knows well how to use the stone and cries: "Stop, you big fools, are you really builders and still do not want that stone? I can use it, not merely to plug a hole or for fill, nor as a common, ordinary stone, but as a cornerstone in the foundation. It shall bear not one but two walls, and it shall do more than all the other stones in the whole building."

Thus Christ would not fit the ways and holiness of the Pharisees, or the whole world itself. They could not stand Him. He disfigured their building. He reprimanded and rebuked their outwardly fine and holy behavior. Then they became angry and condemned and rejected Him, for they did not know how to use Him. Then God, the real Builder, chose Him and made Him the Cornerstone of the foundation on which the whole Christian Church, made up of Jews and Gentiles, stands. It is no different today. The stone is rejected and stays rejected. Nonetheless, with the believing righteous, who build, not on their human works or on the might of princes but on this stone, He remains precious, noble, and valuable (1 Peter 2:7).

Note who they are who reject this stone. They are not simple folk, but the best, that is, the holiest, wisest, most learned, greatest, and noblest. These are offended. The poor, miserable sinners, the downcast, the wanderers, the despised, the little people, and the unlearned accept Him joyfully and gladly. Those others are called builders, that is, they edify, improve, and govern for the good of the people by preaching and teaching. They are not called destroyers, wreckers, or bunglers. They are builders, the most necessary, most useful and best people on earth. Were it not for them, the skies would cave in before nightfall, and land and people would be destroyed. These are the rulers of the spiritual and temporal estates, whose laws govern land and people, and who would also teach God. Among the Jewish people they were the high priests and princes of Jerusalem, Pilate of Rome, and Herod of Galilee. They rejected this Stone and could not tolerate it in their building or government. They knew better.

So, then, if kings, princes, bishops, lords, saints, the wise, the prudent, the rich, and the learned persecute the Gospel, this is not surprising. Who else would do it? No one else can. If there is to be persecution, they must do it; for they are the "builders." They do it *ex officio*; for they must see to it that their building has no crack, rent, or disfiguration. Therefore they cannot tolerate the Word of God or those who declare it, for such a person disfigures their building by causing cracks and rents in it. He is a rabble rouser who misleads the people whom they have so beautifully edified, ordered, and organized. His way of doing things is entirely different from theirs.

But note for your great comfort that here two buildings oppose each other. The one rejects the other. The rejected building, however, has a mighty Builder, who on one Stone erects two strong and everlasting walls. What becomes of the building and of the builders who reject this building? Nothing is said of them here; God knows nothing of them. This is a sign that they and their building have come to naught. He speaks only of the rejected Stone and building; this is His concern. Be careful, therefore, lest you be found in the building which delights in condemning, rejecting, and riding high. Do not be afraid to be in the structure which is rejected, for God will remove your rejection. He will not recognize those who reject you. They will perish, and you will abide forever. No righteousness, no works, no holiness will endure save that which is Christ, the Cornerstone. There is no other Cornerstone. Our own works, though we labor forever, can never be the cornerstone; they will be chaff in the wind. It can never be otherwise. We read (1 Cor. 3:11) that this rejected Stone is the Cornerstone or Foundation.

23. *This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.*

The psalmist says that the Lord Himself is this amazing Builder who will make fools of all other builders, the wise of this world. He chooses and exalts that which they have rejected, as St. Paul says (1

Cor. 1:27): “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.” We also read (Hab. 1:5): “Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.” As the verse before us says, God always performs works which unbelievers do not think He can perform. He makes fools of them. And yet this is a particularly great work in which He makes the rejected Stone the selected Cornerstone. This is such a great and amazing work that not only the heathen with all their understanding and wisdom made fools of themselves but also His own people, the Jews, so stumbled and took offense at it that they utterly destroyed themselves. They lost kingdom and priesthood, heaven and earth. And by no miracles, no matter how great and substantial, could they be preserved; nor can they now be restored, even by much plague and punishment.

What is the cause of so much dissension among Christians today, of so many heresies and sects? Why is the papacy now so rabid, furious, blind, mad, and foolish that it cannot tolerate the teaching that faith without works makes people pious, blessed, alive, and free from sin, death, and the devil? As long as they confess with the mouth that Christ is the Cornerstone, first rejected and then elected, why do they refuse to let Him be effective or actually to acknowledge Him as such? Is there any wonder that carnal-minded people and false hypocrites take offense at this? David says that this is marvelous in our own eyes. Even though the dear saints and Christians take no offense, it is still amazing to their hearts and difficult to believe; they must study it all their lives to believe it. What others feel, that they know best. I consider myself a Christian, but I know full well how hard it was, still is, to grasp and hold this Cornerstone. Men may call me a Lutheran, but they misjudge me; or at best I am a poor and weak Lutheran. May God strengthen me!

We learn quickly to say: “Christ is our Salvation. He is our Righteousness. Our works cannot free us from sin and death. The rejected Cornerstone must do it.” My little books show and testify how well and thoroughly I know this. But when I enter the battle and must come to grips with the devil, sin, death, trouble, and the world; when there is no help, counsel, and consolation except this Cornerstone, then I understand how little I can do and what an art it is to believe in Christ. Then I understand well what David means when he says: “It is marvelous in our eyes.” To be sure, to us it seems to be challenging and almost vexatious—absolutely nothing more. But my papists—they sing: “In our eyes it is not worth mentioning; it is trifling.” “Faith? Faith?”; they say. “What do you mean? Do you think we are heathen or Jews?” Before anyone can recite this verse, they have believed it fully in the twinkling of an eye—so fully, unfortunately, that they have left nothing of it either for us or for anybody else.

Even though all Scripture says that God is marvelous in all His works, and calls Him a worker of miracles, the world does not believe this until it experiences it personally. Everyone in his own heart pictures God as he thinks God ought to act. They prescribe for Him all the words and deeds that He must follow. No one considers: “Why, if He were to act according to my thoughts and understanding, there would be nothing amazing about His works. What if His actions transcend, and differ from, my ideas?” But this does not happen, says Isaiah. They will not quit their phantasizing. They make and shape a god according to their own likes (44:9–17). A monk makes a god who sits on high and thinks: “Whoever observes the rules of Saint Francis, I will save.”⁶³ A nun imagines: “If I am a virgin, God is my bridegroom.” A priest: “God gives heaven to everyone who offers Mass and prays his hours.” No one realizes that God chooses only the rejected Cornerstone and condemns all their making and building. God must suffer Himself to be made, corrected, and formed, from the beginning of the world to its end. No one has any use for the Cornerstone on which He builds and forms us.

24. This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

This is the time of the New Testament, a different day from that which the good sun daily makes. Here the Lord Himself is the Sun; He creates this day with its light and splendor. This day is not followed by night, nor does its light shine into the eyes of the body; it shines into the heart. Nor is this the light of reason, which also is a sun, outwardly showing and teaching works and righteousness before the world. This light teaches grace, peace, and forgiveness of sins before God, of which reason knows nothing. Thus Christ is called the Sun of Righteousness in Mal. 4:2: “But for you who fear my name the Sun of Righteousness shall rise, with healing in Its wings.”⁶⁴ This Sun is to bring righteousness to light, that is, to deliver from sin and make righteous all who believe in Him. It is to give salvation and save from death all those who take refuge under His wings or in His light. This brightness is nothing else but the light and revelation of the Gospel in all the world, which proceeds from Christ and illumines and

enlightens the hearts of the believers, just as the light of the sun goes forth and enlightens the eyes of our bodies and the visible world.

This is a happy day, as the psalmist here rejoices and says: “Let us be glad!” The light and teaching of grace gives the heart peace, rest, and joy in Christ. It realizes that its sins are without merit, that it is delivered from death, and that in God it forever has a gracious Father through Christ, as St. Paul says (Rom. 5:1): “Therefore since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” And then he further describes this peace and joy as something that endures in tribulation and gives courage. No unbeliever can know anything of this joy and peace, nor can those who by their works endeavor to be pious and wipe out their sins. Though they bawl this verse ever so much, especially on Easter Day, they have no understanding of it except as a material, external Easter at which they rejoice in the eating of cake and not in the grace and redemption of Christ.⁶⁵

It is necessary for the prophet to praise this day so emphatically as the Lord’s own day, and to admonish us to rejoice. To all outward appearances the day is gloomy and shines like filth in a lantern.⁶⁶ So far as the world is concerned, it is darkness, error, heresy, and the devil’s own night, to be rejected as its Sun, the noble Cornerstone, is rejected, from whom it receives its light. Therefore the joy and peace of which he sings is more tribulation, discord, and every misfortune, since he is shamefully hated and persecuted by the world, as Christ, the precious Sun, says (Matt. 10:22): “And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake.” Accordingly, just as the light of this day is secret and hidden from the world, so its joy is spiritual and unknown to the flesh, although it is the noblest joy and the supreme light. What could be more precious and nobler than an enlightened heart, a heart that knows God and all things, a heart that can judge rightly and speak truly in all things before God? Where could there be a higher or greater joy than in a happy, secure and fearless conscience, a conscience that trusts in God and fears neither the world nor the devil? On the other hand, where is there greater melancholy and a heavier heart than in an evil, despairing, and guilty conscience? What is more wretched and miserable than an erring and uncertain heart which can judge nothing properly?

25. *Save us, we beseech Thee, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech Thee, give us success!*

Here we have the Hosia Na which the people sang for the Savior when He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This verse and the following were taken from this psalm on that occasion. Apparently this psalm was well known to the people. הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא means “help” or “do help.” The אֲנִי added to it sounds a prayer and indicates the hearts desire. We would say in German: “Help, O dear one, help, do help!” As the “O” and the “do” indicate our hearts desire to persuade Him whom we beg, so the אֲנִי functions in Hebrew. When it is added to הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא and becomes אֲנִי הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא, it means “O Lord, help” or “O dear Lord, help.” The name “Jesus” is derived from the same Hebrew word.⁶⁷ It means Helper or Savior, as the angel says to Joseph (Matt. 1:21): “You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא, “Joshua,” and “Jesus” sound almost alike; and Joshua is the same name as Jesus. In the course of time the word הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא was changed to “Osanna.” Finally even women and bells were baptized and called “Osanna.”⁶⁸

This verse is a prayer or a wish of joy, as when we wish someone good luck and success as he undertakes a new venture or receives something good. Elizabeth, the mother of St. John, received the good wishes of the women regarding her young son (Luke 1:58). She herself also joyfully extended good wishes to the Virgin Mary when Mary visited her (Luke 1:42). Here, too, as the glad day of the Gospel dawns and the kingdom of grace begins, in which sin and death end and righteousness lives and rules, the psalmist leaps for joy and pours out his heart saying: “Hosia Na, Lord; God grant it; God be praised! Happy and blessed is the day on which this light breaks. Heaven and earth and everything in them rejoice with us that we have lived to see this day.” At the same time he desires and asks that it may continue as it began. He prays: “O Lord, Give us success,” as we often do in such a joyful wish: “God grant that this may abide and continue, that it may succeed and never end!”

The kingdom of Christ must suffer much adversity from the devil, the world, and the flesh, and always stands as if it were about to fall and perish, as the fierce tyrants gain the upper hand. Against these attacks, however, these words stand firm: הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא, הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא, הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא Help, help, help! And הַצְלֵחָה! הַצְלֵחָה, הַצְלֵחָה Give us success, give us success, give us success!” These words stand

firm, and the wish of joy must endure and gain the victory. We may well sing the Hosia Na against our papists, Turks, and factions. No one else will sing it for us. They need no Hosia or Jesus. They have their own might and strength. They prefer to sing: “Aha! Aha!” (Ps. 35:21).⁶⁹ They cry: “Down with the heretics!” Let them rejoice! I have not lived very long, but I have heard many such shouts of joy turned into howls, while the Hosia Na survived with honor.

26. *Blessed be He who enters in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord.*

This still belongs to the joyful wish that Christ, the King of Grace, enter through His Gospel and come in the name of the Lord. Again there is need of such a joyous wish. For there are many who roam about in their own name and bring, not the Word of grace but a doctrine of works and the phantasies of their own minds. They, with all the rest of the world, receive this King by saying: “Cursed is He that comes in the name of all the devils; death to Him!” as the Jews did when they cried: “Away with Him; crucify Him at once!” He must be the rejected and condemned Cornerstone, and His Word an accursed heresy of the devil. This is the song of the cathedrals and cloisters. Only believers sing: “Praised and blessed be He that comes in the name of the Lord!”

Then these singers also experience the next thing: “We bless you from the house of the Lord.” These words teach that this joyous wish is not only for the King but also for all you who are in His household, who believe in Him and accept Him. Praised, happy, blessed, and full of all grace and joy are you because you are of the house of the King! “You are not strangers and sojourners, but members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). You are built on the rejected Cornerstone. Although you are rejected and must be called the devil’s household, it does not matter. Let them blaspheme and curse. Be content that we bless you and call you blessed and rich. Our testimony is the testimony of God and of all the angels, all the saints, and all the creatures of God. Why are you concerned about the devil and the world?

I think everyone knows that “God’s house” means where He dwells, and that He dwells where His Word is, be it in the field, in church, or on the sea. On the other hand, where His Word is absent, He is absent, nor is His house there; but there the devil dwells, though it be a church of gold blessed by all the bishops. But where God’s house is, there is pure blessing, grace, and life, as the psalmist says: “We bless you from the house of the Lord.” You are blessed, because you are in the Lord’s house. God says (Ex. 20:24): “In every place where I cause My name (that is, My Word) to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you.” In this passage this verse in the psalm had its origin. Wherever God sends out His Word, by which His name and work and not our name and work are praised, there He also comes with pure grace and every blessing, as Moses declares. But wherever the devil sends out his word and it is accepted, he follows with his curse and eternal destruction. The world, however, does not believe this and considers and praises the devil as God, his curse as a blessing, and his lies as truth.

27. *The Lord is God, and He has given us light. Bind the festival with branches, up to the horns of the altar!*

Here the psalmist names the child, and specifically states who the king is who rides in the name of the Lord. He says: It is God, the Lord Himself, who appears and shows us His light. He may be a rejected stone, but He is still God; for he refers to Him who has appeared and enlightened us, whose Gospel and light we feel in our hearts. It is the Lord God Himself, and there is no other God. Why else would he use such lofty praise, “The Lord is God”? For no Jew would doubt this if it did not mean a man. But this calls for faith, when it is said that the rejected Cornerstone, which enlightens the world with a new day, is God and Lord. If He were not a man, He could not be the rejected Cornerstone; for God cannot be rejected. And yet He is not only a man but also God Himself. At this point the psalmist faces the loathing and offense of the Jews and of all those to whom it is an abomination to hear that a man is true God. They fear some form of idolatry. For this reason he would say: “Do not be alarmed; there is no danger of idolatry. This is the true God Himself, for no one else can grant release from sin and death or enlighten hearts except God. His works prove that He is God.”

Then he commands that the festival and the new day be bound with branches. Thereby he abolishes the Old Testament. The Jews had a festival called the Feast of the Tabernacles, or Succoth, which they celebrated for eight days in memory of the forty years during which the Children of Israel had lived in tents in the wilderness (Lev. 23:42). To this he refers and would say: “Why do you still make a show with your branches and tabernacles? Something new has come, and your custom is done. This is another

day, another house of God, another altar, another festival, another life. Now come here and celebrate this new festival with branches, since our new King and God Himself rides in with grace and blessing and appears to the whole world in His Word. Put your branches here in the house of the Lord, not in the field or in your yards. Put them even on the horns or corners of the altar, that everything may be full of branches and merriment. There is no longer any difference between the Levites and the people. Everyone who believes may approach the altar, a privilege not granted in the Law.”

In addition, he explains what the branches and leaves symbolize, namely, that men should adorn, praise, beautify, and exalt the name of God with joyful, fresh, green, and beautiful preaching and singing. These are the branches cut from beautiful trees, that is, taken from the prophets. And when he speaks of the place or corners called the horns of the altar, he means the altar of thanksgiving. There those branches are offered as thank offerings; and no longer are calves, sheep, birds, and the like to be slaughtered. Now everything that formerly was outwardly performed by the Levites is clone by thanks and praise, preaching and teaching.

28. *Thou art my God, and I will give thanks to Thee; Thou art my God; I will extol Thee.*

The psalmist now concludes this psalm with a strong declaration and denunciation against all offenses and examples of the unbelievers. He would say: “They will not accept Thee as God. Thou art the rejected stone, a malefactor crucified among malefactors. Thy Word and service are held to be the devil’s word and service. For this I must suffer all manner of disgrace and danger. But let it pass; Thou art nevertheless my God. I will still believe in Thee, and I know for a certainty that Thou art ray God. Let the Law, temple, altar, and all services at Jerusalem be gone. Let friend and foe pass away. Let there be no more wisdom, holiness, strength, goods, honor, and whatever else will pass away. I desire Thee alone; in place of all these Thou wilt be more than enough. I shall be Thy poor little parson and priest and offer true sacrifices and services of God, namely, the thank offering and the hymns of praise. This will be my priestly office, my feast of the tabernacles, that I preach or praise nothing but Thee, the rejected Cornerstone, the crucified God.”⁷⁰ This is my resolution. By this I will abide. This shall be the long and short of it. This is what I sought and meant with this psalm. Let no one tell me anything else. Let me not be confused. As St. Paul says (Gal. 6:17), ‘I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.’ ” Amen. Hosia Na. Amen.

29. *O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever!*

We often sing a good song over again from the beginning, especially one we have sung with pleasure and joy. Thus a bride prepares a wreath for her groom, bringing the two ends together to make it a beautiful decoration for her head. That is what David does in this psalm. After he has ended his song to all the blessings of God and has especially praised the last, His eternal grace, he says: “Oh, who can ever thank God enough for His goodness! It is as I said at the beginning of this psalm: ‘His steadfast love endures forever. Especially does it endure for that poor little fourth group.’”⁷¹ If only men would believe this!” Men also do good deeds, but no good deed lasts forever. Human nature cannot stand ingratitude. Nor does man do good for God’s sake or for the sake of virtue, but only for his own sake.

This you can see if you observe a man who has done good deeds for a number of people. If they later are ungrateful or say or do something that provokes him, you will see how he flares up, scolds, judges, and says reproachfully: “Well, I helped him once or twice; now that’s all. He need not come to me again!” And if the occasion ever arises when he can get revenge or sees that his help is needed, he will act like a block of wood or a balky horse. If he can do no more, he resists wherever he can and leaves the good undone. Yet he thinks he is pious and does the right thing, without any compunctions of conscience. He cannot rise to the point where he would think: “Well, I did not do that good deed for him because of his wickedness, nor shall I stop on this account. God bestows much good on me daily, though all my life I have done nothing but grieve Him.” No, he does not draw such thoughts from the example of his ungrateful neighbor, which ought to lead him to sweep before his own door and consider his own ingratitude.

Basically, what is human kindness but a threefold misdeed? With it men seek thanks and honor, yes, even mastery over those to whom they do good. It is a proud, boastful, vindictive, and selfish kindness, one that later turns to anger and everlastingly hurts and damages wherever it can. About man this verse might well be changed to read: “Shame on mankind for being so wicked, for the harm they do endures forever. Their kindness is brief and temporary, it is done only to those who adore and honor them. They

hate to lose a blessing or have it fail to yield dividends.” But God and His children do good without returns. They gladly waste their kindness on the ungrateful, as it is written (Prov. 16:4): “The Lord has made everything for its purpose.” Therefore He does not stop doing good because of the wickedness of men. Thus He proves that He is good by nature, and that His goodness does not stand or fall by the vice or virtue of another, as human goodness may stand on the virtue of one and fall by the vice of, another and even become worse than he is. The entire thirty-seventh Psalm speaks of this,⁷² and the verse before us is explained sufficiently for the time being. May Christ, our Lord, make us human beings true, perfect Christians. To Him be praise and thanks forever! Amen.

PSALM • 147

Translated by
EDWARD SITTLER

12. *Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!*
13. *For He strengthens the bars of your gates; He blesses your sons within you.*
14. *He makes peace in your borders; He fills you with the finest of the wheat.*
15. *He sends forth His command to the earth; His Word runs swiftly.*
16. *He gives snow like wool; He scatters hoarfrost like ashes.*
17. *He casts forth His ice like morsels; who can stand before His cold?*
18. *He sends forth His Word, and melts them; He makes His wind blow, and the waters flow.*
19. *He declares His Word to Jacob, His statutes and ordinances to Israel.*
20. *He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know His ordinances. Praise the Lord!*

PREFACE

To the august and honorable Hans Löser, hereditary marshal of Saxony, my gracious lord and dear friend.

GRACE and peace in Christ, my august, honorable, and dear lord and friend:

When I was with you recently, trying to drive away the buzzing and weariness of my head through physical exercise, you showed me the honor and kindness of taking me along on a hunting trip. At the same time I did some spiritual hunting on my own as I sat in the carriage; I bagged Psalm 147, *Lauda Jerusalem*, together with its exposition, and this was my happiest hunt and grandest game. Now that I have brought it home and carved it, I want to tell you about it, lest I have a bad conscience for having concealed a prize won on your estate and be found ungrateful and destructive. I am sending Your Honor the whole thing, and yet I am keeping all of it for myself. This kind of game can be shared among friends in such a wonderful way that everyone gets all of it while no one comes short. May it please Your Honor to accept it, for I am glad to serve you.

God be with you and with your vine and olive plants!¹ Amen.

Saturday after St. Lucy's, 1531.²

DR. MARTIN LUTHER

THROUGH the influence of its lord and master, the devil, this accursed world is so shamefully unthankful and so contemptuously abuses God's grace and gifts, both spiritual and physical, and thus acts contrary and hostile to His divine Word and command, that its hour of reckoning is surely coming. Therefore I have taken it upon myself to sing and interpret this psalm that God may be honored and thanked. Perhaps there may be, somewhere, two or three devout Christians who will sing and praise with me, so that much more than ingratitude and contempt may be found in this life.

Primarily this psalm gives praise and thanks for the physical benefits of God, which means a good year or a good season in which God gives peace and fruitfulness on earth, so that men can feed and govern themselves. We must admit that this year 1531 has been a good year. Who knows when we shall do so well again?³ Yet there is no one in the world who is grateful to God. Instead, men in their avarice use everything in the most inconsiderate fashion, yes, even to persecute and pervert the Gospel and the glory of God. But the world straggles toward its eternal damnation; and this will most certainly burst upon it suddenly and without warning.

12. *Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!*

God does not demand great sacrifices or precious treasures of great price for His blessings. No, He asks for the easiest work of all, namely, to sing and praise, and this takes neither work nor effort. For what is easier to do than to say: “Praise be to Thee, O merciful God”? Or: “I thank Thee for Thy goods

and gifts.” Or: “Thou art a holy, faithful God and a gentle Father.” No one need run to Rome or even bestir himself. And finally, what a trilling work and effort it is to read or hear such a psalm! If we cannot perform such easy services for God, how would we then fare in those great and difficult ones, such as keeping the Ten Commandments or suffering all evil for His sake or risking body and life, property and honor for Him? Surely, whoever cannot or will not give thanks to God will never do or suffer everything for His sake.

And it is a great shame, if we are still capable of being ashamed, that, like sluggards, we must be goaded into giving thanks or, like sleepers, be shaken into an awareness of it, and that these gifts must be counted off, named, and pictured to us. We are daily so overwhelmed by them and use them so constantly that we really ought to goad and admonish ourselves to thanksgiving without psalms and outside reminders, being moved, enticed, and inspired by the gifts themselves. But this does not happen. One must sing and blow at us to impress on us that we ought to praise the Lord, and even the words must be prefabricated and put into our mouths, as this psalm does. But still our flabby flesh will not be moved to such easy, delightful, and happy works and to such a pleasant service of God. Shame on us that we are not shocked or do not blush every time we hear or read a verse in the Psalms!

But it is even more shameful that one must even name for us the Benefactor Himself and say to Jerusalem: “Dear people, be so good as to praise the Lord!” or say to Zion: “Dear people, condescend to praise your God; He certainly deserves it, and it is such a fitting and becoming service.” There are many who make use of all of God’s benefits every day and see and know very well that they have great gifts and all that is good. But not once do they consider from whom they have these things or that it is God who gives them. They take them as though these things just happened, or as though they had earned them through their own labor, diligence, and wisdom. They imagine that God must give them these things and that they owe Him no thanks.

No animal would live as disgracefully as does this world, no, not even a sow. For a sow knows the housewife or maid from whom she receives her slops and swill; she runs after her and cries to her. But the world does not know and honor the God who so richly and boundlessly blesses it; much less does it thank and praise Him. Therefore one sees that despite the daily howling and bawling of this simple and sparkling psalm by the clergy in our churches⁴ it still remains unknown and uncomprehended by these blind and misguided people. And if one must encourage even Jerusalem and Zion, what can one expect of Babylon and Sodom? So stubborn is man’s refusal to recognize God and His gifts, and to thank Him.

13. For He strengthens the bars of your gates; He blesses your sons within you.

Now the psalmist begins to count and name these blessings. The first is protection, that is, that God guards and keeps the gates of the city so that men can dwell there in safety and quiet. How many citizens or people have in their whole lives even once thought that the protection and security of a city is a gift from God? What peasant in his village thinks that it is a gift from God that he can sit behind his fence in security with his household? If every hour he could expect thieves and robbers to plunder his house, or in wartime fear that at any hour his house and home may be burned to the ground and, on top of this, that he himself may be beaten and tortured, then he would learn to sing this psalm and say: “O how happy they are” and “O what a great gift from God it is to be able to eat bread and drink water in peace and safety!”

But now that such divine protection and security are present in such abundance, no one pays any attention to this. Instead of giving thanks to God we proceed to misuse this peace in the most highhanded way, oppose God’s Word, are rebellious and disobedient to the authorities, betray and deceive one another, raise prices and create hard times,⁵ practice usury and live as if we ourselves were God and lord of the earth. Therefore in return God must give us fools our comeuppance and send us war, thieves, robbers, revolution, fire, flood, pestilence, and other such catastrophes to teach us what safety and security mean and what a noble gift of God they are. Otherwise we would never learn it.

The word “bars,” however, we must understand not only as the iron bar which a smith can make but, by synecdoche,⁶ everything else that helps to protect us, such as good government, good city ordinances, good order, stern punishments, and pious, faithful, and wise rulers. Iron bars alone will not achieve secure protection for a city. This is why now and again in the writings of the prophets the princes and rulers are called the “bars” of the city or nation.⁷

In other words, wherever there is protection and security, it is not by human intelligence or power; this is a gift of God. Something more than iron bars or a smith is needed; God Himself, he says, must fasten the bars. We read in Ps. 127:1: “Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” Many stout cities have been taken and destroyed, even though they were thought to be impregnable. When He who makes fast the bars took away His hand, they perished. How often the great and seemingly almighty city of Babylon was ignominiously taken! How easily and quickly the empires of Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome were destroyed! Nothing will hold unless God holds it.

On the other hand, God does not want man to tempt Him by not making gates and bars or doing anything for the protection of the city, as though the gates should stand open, the walls be torn down, all arms and defense neglected, all order and punishment abolished, and thus the city be left to protect itself or God alone be expected to do everything. That would be wrong. You should build and forge bars, fortify the city and arm yourself, establish order and laws as best you can. But once you have done this, see that you do not depend on it and say: “Now I sit here safe and snug, and all is well.” Thus the heathen did when the king of Babylon boasted of his city (Dan. 4:30), and Arbaces of his city, Ecbatana;⁸ both had to change their minds. Instead, inscribe this motto on the gates: “Now God help us! Otherwise all this is in vain.”

God could easily give you grain and fruit without your plowing and planting. But He does not want to do so. Neither does He want your plowing and planting alone to give you grain and fruit; but you are to plow and plant and then ask His blessing and pray: “Now let God take over; now grant grain and fruit, dear Lord! Our plowing and planting will not do it. It is Thy gift.” This is what we do when we teach children to fast and pray and hang up their stockings that the Christ Child or St. Nicholas may bring them presents. But if they do not pray, they will get nothing or only a switch and horse apples.

What else is all our work to God—whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government—but just such a child’s performance, by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of God,⁹ behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things. Had Gideon done nothing but take the field against Midian, the Midianites would not have been beaten; and God could certainly have beaten them without Gideon. He could give children without using men and women. But He does not want to do this. Instead, He joins man and woman so that it appears to be the work of man and woman, and yet He does it under the cover of such masks. We have the saying: “God gives every good thing, but not just by waving a wand.”¹⁰ God gives all good gifts; but you must lend a hand and take the bull by the horns; that is, you must work and thus give God good cause and a mask.

Therefore the psalm says at this point: “He makes fast.” What does He make fast? The bars of your gates He can and will make fast, but the gates and bars have to be there to be made fast. Without your bars He does not fasten the gates. At the same time, the bars are not fast of themselves. That is why both are necessary: You should make and supply the bars and gates, but He will make them fast. You are not to make them fast, and He does not want to make bars. That is a fair division of labor. Make the bars and gates, and let Him fasten them. Labor, and let Him give the fruits. Govern, and let Him give His blessing. Fight, and let Him give the victory. Preach, and let Him win hearts. Take a husband or a wife, and let Him produce the children. Eat and drink, and let Him nourish and strengthen you. And so on. In all our doings He is to work through us, and He alone shall have the glory from it, as Paul says in 1 Cor. 3:7: “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”

Now all this is said to refute those who tempt God, want to do nothing, and think God will give them whatever they desire without any work or diligence on their part. There is a fitting proverb for such people: “Sit still, and have faith; wait for the fried chicken to fly into your mouth.” God wants no lazy idlers. Men should work diligently and faithfully, each according to his calling and profession, and then God will give blessing and success. This is intended also for those who presume to think that results will come or have to come because of their industry and labor, or their cleverness and skill, and care nothing about God. But here again the right balance is this: “Don’t be lazy or idle, but don’t rely solely on your own work and doings. Get busy and work, and yet expect everything from God alone.” That is to say: Everything must be done in faith and trust in God. And if at times you see good fortune given to the lazy or arrogant, don’t be angry. For it can’t last or endure or be handed down; finally it will go to pieces. We

have seen right under our noses many examples of how quickly great possessions have been destroyed and are being destroyed daily.

Another gift is the good fortune that a city is full of people, well populated and well built. This is a blessing of God and a fruit of peace and protection, not of our power or skill. For if a city is untouched by war but is nevertheless poorly built and thinly populated, then it is not temporally blessed; it is probably half cursed. We are told in Ps. 127:3,¹¹ that children and strong young people are gifts of God; and in the prophets,¹² when God is angry with a city, He always threatens to make it a widow, a desolate place, without inhabitants or children. For “children” means children not only of the house but also of the city, that is, all who live and are sheltered in it, whether young or old, man or woman, clergy or laity, with all they have and acquire.

Now this blessing, that a city is full of people, includes all other gifts necessary for the maintenance of the people—such as house, property, money, clothes, cattle, wives, children, servants, also all handicrafts and trades—so that nothing shall be lacking but things shall daily improve, grow, and prosper. For where such things decline or lapse, there the city goes to ruin and is so depopulated that it cannot be built up again in a lifetime. But how many people are there in such a city who thank God for such blessings and good fortune? Indeed, how many of you recognize that it is God’s gift and blessing? How many people right here in Wittenberg have ever thanked God for the two streams, the sluggish stream and the rushing stream,¹³ from which for years they have brewed and drunk many a pleasant drink and which they have used generously in their homes for every need, a blessing not to be paid for with any amount of money? I shall not speak of the other gifts and blessings of house, home, children, cattle, etc.

It is the devil who is to blame that there are not many such thankful people, but that instead they scorn God in all things and do not recognize His kindnesses and blessings. They prefer to think: “It is all the result of our doing and our work; and we have earned and achieved it.” And then they shamefully misuse it all against God and their neighbor, are proud and boastful, exploit and betray others, overcharge, cheat, and behave arrogantly. But finally God will be aroused at our evil-doing and send wars or tyrants upon us to give us our deserts and take away His gifts and blessings, leaving behind a poor, miserable city. Then we will learn how great God’s gifts and blessings were in former times, to have a city full of people, well built and well supplied.

There are some idiots, however, who regret that a city is so well blessed that it is full of people, etc. For they would prefer to see it lean and empty, so that they alone might grow thick, fat, and great in it. When there are many people, they are afraid that they may come short in their greed and pride, and that others will also eat and live alongside them. They calculate and measure everything exactly, according to person and wealth, not considering that the wealth of all the cities in the world is far, far too little to supply their people. God’s blessing alone, as David says, can do this. A proverb teaches the same thing: “The more people, the more prosperity.”

And tell me how things are. A day laborer earns about a groschen a day. In a year this amounts to hardly fifteen gulden, not counting holidays and other days when he does not work.¹⁴ With this he must feed himself, his wife, and five or six children. Now you can figure out how much per day there is to squander, for clothes, fuel, etc. Our children are still as fat as snails, and there is no hunger in their eyes; even the children of princes and lords are not as well fed. Must we not here fall back on this psalm: “He has blessed your children within you”? It is certainly true that when someone is in prison, or where one wants to starve a person into submission and take away his property, as the peasants, the nobility, and tyrants are now doing to the clergy, there lean and hungry bodies will result. Therefore it has surely been the blessing of God, not our labor, effort, and cunning, when a city is full of people, prosperous, and flourishing.

14. He makes peace in your borders; He fills you with the finest of the wheat.

The third blessing is peace, that there is not only protection and prosperity in the city, but peace and good times in the countryside round about. There men are able to live in safety, plow, plant, raise cattle, or carry on other activities. And this peace includes loyal neighbors and an obedient nobility and peasantry, as the saying goes: “Peace lasts as long as your neighbor wants it.” Or again: “That’s the price of this neighborhood.”¹⁵ It is not the least misfortune on earth to have unfaithful, hostile neighbors. Now run the gamut from peasant to emperor, and observe what damage, treachery, hindrance, scorn, and

real heartache can be inflicted by one peasant, one citizen, one lord and ruler, one king on another. Also among the Jews there is a curse: “May God give you a bad neighbor.”¹⁶

On the other hand, it is not one of the smallest blessings on earth to have God-fearing, loyal neighbors. They can do no end of good, and thus peace is better established than if a city were to surround itself with all the power in the world and be guarded by walls of solid iron. Even the heathen know this. Terence says, for example: “Whoever thinks that a dominion is better maintained by force than by friendship is sadly in error.”¹⁷ And Aristotle: “Whatever is maintained by force cannot last.”¹⁸ The reason for this? It is said: “No one ever became so bad that someone worse did not follow.” Or again: “Jack is no better than John,” and “People are people everywhere.” The Babylonian empire was bad, but the Persians were even worse and dismembered it. The Persian empire was bad, but Alexander was even worse and gobbled up the Persians. The Romans were also bad; but the Goths, the Wends, and the Turks were even worse and plundered Rome with a will. Just now the Turk is bad; but if the world stands a while longer, he, too, will bow to someone worse.

Therefore Cato, the wise Roman, tells us in his advice on conducting a household: “One must be diligent and conduct oneself so that our neighbors love us and are friendly toward us; this helps in making a living.”¹⁹ The Holy Scriptures also praise such good will, as in Ecclus. 25:2 f.: “In three things I was beautified, and stood up beautiful before the Lord and men, the concord of brethren, and friendship of neighbors, and a woman and her husband walking together in agreement.” And Solomon praises it also in Prov. 27:10: “Better is a neighbor that is near than a brother far off.” Of what help are a thousand brothers who live far away? I would trade them all for a good neighbor, and I would hesitate to anger or neglect a neighbor for the sake of the whole lot.

This is not the place to tell how one is to behave so that one’s neighbors will be friendly and well disposed. Both the heathen and our own reason say: Patience and benevolence will do it. We must be patient and not be too severe or seek revenge when they happen to hurt us. Instead, we should overlook it and be friendly to them in word and deed. It is well said, and it is also the teaching of Scripture, that we should love our neighbor, even our enemy. But then one sometimes finds neighbors so crude and coarse, so full of hatred and envy, that patience and kindness make them worse. Therefore we are told that beyond all the skill and power of man “God makes peace in your borders.” And it is nothing but the gift of God if such peace prevails in the land. He must hold, guide, and turn the hearts and hands of neighbors toward peace and check and repel those who are without principle.

Of course, it is true, as I said before, that we should do our utmost to make peace prevail in our country, just as we should plow and sow to raise grain. To keep the peace, we should also be patient and friendly toward our neighbors. And our rulers should establish borders, build roads, and arm themselves against enemies and evil neighbors. But when all this has been done, one should say: “Well, I have done everything necessary to keep the peace, and all that is required for defense. But all this is nothing. Lord God, give Thou Thy blessing to this work, and establish peace within our borders. Our efforts can do nothing, our plowing and sowing cannot produce the fruits we need, no matter how gladly we work at it.” Truly God will bless such faith in your diligence and such work for peace, and He will grant and maintain His gift of peace.

But now, to get back to the psalm, where are those who give thanks to God for this gift of peace? Yes, where are those who even recognize it as a God-given gift or do not, on top of everything else, show contempt for God? We exploit Him for our own pleasure and liking, and act as though such a peace were our birthright in which to live and act as we choose, against both God and man. It is unspeakable how insolent and presumptuous the peasants have become through these years of peace. Their very skin seems to itch, almost like a sow fattened for the slaughter, as though they could not and would not put up with these good times any more and would not rest until the butcher seizes them and makes sausage of them. This is the thanks God gets for having given these villains such precious peace. But see how long He will put up with it!

Our own young lordlings of the nobility, especially these incorrigible young roughnecks—are they to be expected to thank God for this peace? That would be humiliating to the whole nobility! They are the ones who establish peace within our borders! Furthermore, it was wrong of David to sing such a song about God. He should have sung about the nobility, and clothed and decorated these gentlemen with the beauty of this psalm. Since he did not do so, they appropriate it and adorn themselves with it.

For they assume that they are lords over both war and peace. They will take orders from no prince or lord, even if God were to come with all His angels. They alone must protect and save; they alone must keep the peace. Without their help God Himself might be driven out of heaven! And for this they need neither luck nor blessing. It is enough that they draw their swords and utter a resounding curse, whereupon peace, war, and everything else comes about just as they wish.

I fear greatly that such slanderers, blasphemers, and loudmouths will one day suddenly waken the Lord, who will pluck this psalm from them, take it back as His own, and then let them see just what they can achieve with all their boasting and blustering if they do not have His gifts. Thus they and all others will learn that it is God who establishes peace within our borders. And if it should ever happen that they must defend and protect us, or establish the peace, then may God have mercy on us and take us away! For then most certainly the sheep would be entrusted to the wolf for peace, and the poor sinner to the devil for help against death.

Finally—and listen well, you who want to learn—we are to work for peace by showing patience and friendliness toward our neighbors, by preparing our land and roads, by fortifying cities and borders against the enemy. In no case, however, are we to boast or strut about it; we must rely on God, who will give and maintain peace for us if we are worthy of it; and if we are not, well, then no arms will help. These very lord protectors who are supposed to establish peace will be the first and worst offenders and will inflict all sorts of misfortune and misery on us, as we hear they did in Vienna and wherever they are sent.²⁰ This is because they do not know God and His gifts and rely on themselves. Therefore they cannot perform any honest²¹ work for peace. Instead, when they boast of making peace, they accomplish the opposite.

In God's peace are to be included all other good things that belong to peace, such as health of the body in the face of pestilence, flood, fire, poison, and all sorts of miseries and sickness. For where such misfortunes prevail, the condition of the country is not good, and the devil has a field day with calamity and distress. It is God's gift alone, not our precautions or efforts, that prevents the daily raging of pestilence, sicknesses, and other torments of the devil. And if God does not ordain peace here too, then all our pharmacies, physicians, skill, aid, and advice will be far too weak. We should make diligent use of these means and skills without relying on them, as has been said, but always with this prayer: "Lord God, grant Thy grace and peace to this work. We have done our best; we have planted; grant Thou the fruits," as I told you before.

The fourth gift is our blessed daily bread, as is said: "He fills you with the finest of wheat." That is to say, He gives you grain and the produce of the field in abundance, and all things necessary to eat and drink for sustenance. But more: He gives not only grain but the "finest" grain, select and tender wheat. And He not only gives it; He satisfies us with plenty. Thus the psalmist wants to show that God will provide enough to eat and drink, as St. Paul says (1 Tim. 6:17): "Who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy." And this is certainly true; for every year so much is grown (where God is merciful and does not want to punish us) that the world cannot eat it, but much is left over. Of course, there is never enough for greed. If the earth were made of grain and the seas were all wine and the mountains pure gold, they could never satisfy a greedy man, even though he had it all to himself.

But now who believes that it is God's gift when we have such an abundance of grain and wine and all kinds of crops? Where are the people who thank and praise Him for this? O yes, they are carousing and dissipating. Or they are cheating, raising prices, and grinding down the poor and whomever they can. We use this gift as though we, not God, had made it. We do not ever give God a thought, just as these peasants and noblemen do as they please with their price fixing. They own the granaries and the crops; and now they also want the money, so that others will have nothing and they alone will own everything.²² Very well, time will tell if they are right, when they themselves shall have nothing. Just let them go ahead.

We are to learn from this and to praise and thank God for making the grain grow. We are to recognize that it is not our work but His blessing and gift that grain, wine, and all kinds of crops grow, for us to eat and drink and use for our needs, as is shown in the Lord's Prayer when we say: "Give us this day our daily bread." With the word "give" we concede that it is God's gift, not our creation. If He did not give it, not a single seed would grow, and all our agriculture would be for nothing. In truth, this gift is so tremendous that it must be miraculously preserved through God's power until such time as we

can receive and enjoy it. For how quickly the seed in the ground could rot, freeze, mold, be eaten by worms, or be washed away by water! And even when it sprouts, how quickly it could be destroyed by heat, weather, and hail, or eaten up by bugs and other animals! And who can count all the dangers to which the grain and vines are exposed before they are brought to the barns? Even there it can still be devoured by worms and be gone. The devil would not let a blade or leaf sprout or grow were God not constantly on guard.

Therefore when we see a whole field or one grain, we should recognize not only God's goodness but also His power and say to ourselves: "O lovely grain! God gives you to us in abundance out of His great goodness. And with what great power He protects you! What dangers have you not survived from the hour when you were sown until you are put on the table! With what mighty power has He not torn you from the devil's fingers and hands, which clutch and snatch to destroy you and starve us!"

Yes, yes, is this what we are supposed to think? But we have other things to do besides acknowledging the mercy and power of God. We are the ones who worked hardest for this grain. If we had not done the work, God could not have given us anything. Thus we go our way like the very sticks and stones and commit usury, greed, and debauchery on these mighty and merciful gifts of God, thus persecuting both God and our fellow men.

But a devout and believing heart understands well how useless all our plowing, sowing, and the like would be without the help of God's gifts. Although we are to do such work with diligence and seek our nourishment from the soil (Gen. 3:19), we are not to depend solely on this as though it could be done with our hands. More than our hands is necessary. God must bless and prosper it, and then mightily defend it against all devils. And this is true not only of the fourth gift but also of the three listed earlier. The devil would grant us none of them; God must give them and protect them against his malice.

15. He sends forth His command to the earth; His Word runs swiftly.

Here we are told of the marvelous way in which God translates His blessings into action and gives them to us. It takes only one word from Him, and that is *fiat*, as in Gen. 1:3. To make fast the gates He does not need forge, hammer, anvil, or tongs. He needs neither brick nor mortar to build peace. He does not need the help of women, merchants, or manufacturers of coin to make His children rich and happy. He needs neither plow nor harrow to satisfy us with wheat; but He need only say to the bars: "Be fast," and they are fast. And to the populace: "Be rich and happy," and they are rich and happy. And to the borders: "Peace be within you," and peace is there. And to the earth: "Bring forth wheat," and there it is, just as we are told in Ps. 33:9: "For He spoke, and it stood fast," or again in Ps. 105:31:²³ "He spoke the word, and there came all manner of flies."

Therefore when it says here: "He sends forth His command to the earth," we should understand that He sends His command to the earth and to all that is on the earth. This is the sense of Ps. 107:20 when it speaks of those who are deathly sick and yet recover: "He sent His Word and healed them." That is, He commands: "Be healed," and one is healed. He needs no medicine but heals by the utterance of His Word. Now take Ps. 148:8:²⁴ "Fire and hail, snow and vapors, stormy wind, fulfilling His Word." This means that they do what He says. His command or speech is equivalent to creation, as we read in Gen. 1 that He created the world by His Word. And Paul says (Rom. 4:17): "God gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."

And His Word, says the psalmist, "runs swiftly"; that is, everything that God wills happens quickly, instantly. And as soon as He speaks, there it is. Thus in Gen. 1 God spoke, and it was so. His Word is not a rotten, sickly, or dead word, like the words and commandments of men. Let men order and command as they will; nothing happens, or at least very little. For even the words and commands of the king or of our masters are done piecemeal and slowly. Their words do not run swiftly; they creep and crawl, taking their time. As the saying goes: "It's only an order from the boss!"; that is, no one pays any attention to it. Truly, if God's Word is not added, saying: "What you, king or prince, have ordered, let that be done," nothing will happen. His Word must be added in order to give force to the rulers command and respect and obedience to the subject. Otherwise what the ruler says will remain just "an order from the boss."

But when God says to the earth: "Be verdant," everything is green; when He says: "Grow," the blades spring up; when He says: "Produce wheat," the wheat flourishes. And all this happens soon and quickly, as we can see with our own eyes, so that His Word does not creep but runs, yes, even leaps and

is there in one jump. Therefore when He commands peace within our borders, then there quickly follows a peace which no prince's order could create or maintain. When He blesses the people in the city and commands their prosperity, then there is at once a prosperity which neither commerce nor industry can produce. When He commands the bars to be fast, then the city is well secured and protected, better than any wall or cannon can secure or protect it.

Thus this verse confirms what we said before about the four blessings: that they are the result, not of our power or skill but are, and should be called, God's blessings. And unless God creates with His Word, all our work and effort is for nothing. For with all our human labor we are not able to make a single blade of grass grow out of the earth or to sustain it, much less satisfy ourselves with wheat. We cannot even defend a dog, much less keep the peace within our borders. We cannot earn a single heller, much less grow rich and happy; or swat a fly, much less make fast the gates. "His Word," not "our hand"; "His Word," not "our technique," makes and accomplishes all things. Therefore this verse shows the reasons why David ascribes the four blessings, not to us men but to God, and tells us to be thankful. "God is the reason," he says; "for you do nothing and can do nothing; but when God speaks, then you have it. His Word and command creates all that you have."

But this is also said in order to comfort us, to arouse and strengthen our faith. For when we hear that we have a God who so easily creates and accomplishes all things, that it takes only one word from Him, then we should gladly and confidently trust and believe that He can and will give all things despite the gates of hell (Matt. 16:18). The man who could believe this, that God with one word can easily do all things, of whom should such a man be afraid? Even if the Turks or all the world were to besiege him, what could they do to one who believes that God's Word has such strength and power? Before such a man the Turks would be as weak as flies. We, however, do not believe but look to our own strength. Whatever this cannot accomplish we think impossible for God also, and we constantly doubt and despair. Or, on the other hand, if we do have or accomplish something, we do not believe that God did it for us. O we are unbelieving, ungrateful, shameful, wicked children!

16. *He gives snow like wool; He scatters hoarfrost like ashes.*

17. *He casts forth His ice like morsels; who can stand before His cold?*

Here the psalmist gives an example of winter, in order to confirm his view. In a sense, winter is the exact opposite of summer; for in winter the land lies waste and desolate, and produces neither grain nor fruit, so that it seems as though nothing more would ever grow out of the earth. A man who had never experienced a winter might well despair and think that heaven and earth had become our enemies and wanted to kill us with hunger and frost. Or a type of Manichean belief might arise, with a god of summer, who would be good and merciful enough to increase and nourish mankind, and a second god of winter, who would be angry and evil, to starve and extinguish the human race.²⁵ But now it is the same one God, both in summer and in winter, even though in winter He puts on an appearance different from the one He puts on in summer. Winter looks like death, anger, and everything bad, as compared with the summer, which looks like life, grace, and all good things.

In order that we may become stronger in faith and not doubt that God can easily and with one word create and do all things, David asks us to consider winter as compared with summer; for in this contrast God portrays what He can do and how He always works. In winter He sends snow, rime, and frost, so that no man can bear it. Surely nobody could survive a real winter if he had to do without fire and warmth and depend only on the sun, as he does in summer. The whole creation is powerless to make even a grain of wheat grow or any fruit ripen in winter, but God can change the winter, banish it, and bring the summer again, so that one forgets the winter. And He does this so easily that it costs Him only one word. Shouldn't you, then, the more easily believe that He can help you out of your winter and all distress, easily and with a single word? He can certainly find wheat when you are starving. He knows well how to make peace when you are threatened by war. He can give prosperity to a city when it has been mined. He can make the bars fast, if they are weak or broken. And He can do this easily, with one word. This is logical, since He can make summer out of winter with one word, which is really more and greater than helping you out of your distress.

After all, how can the misfortune of an individual, a city, or a country compare with the winter, which is a misfortune to the whole human race and all the world? What else is winter but an annual deluge or a yearly destruction of the entire world, so that it is dead, just as the first world was drowned

in the Flood? What are the living rooms, ovens, fireplaces, fire, straw, wood, and furs with which we warm ourselves but so many Noah's arks, in which we survive the winter and do not freeze, just as Noah in his ark escaped drowning? Without these we should most certainly be destroyed by the winter, as the psalm says here: "Who can stand before His cold?"

Now consider: If God every year helps the entire world out of winter, its annual flood and death, should you not learn from this mighty example of God's power, performed annually before your very eyes, to trust and believe in Him in every need? Look how even the godless, who believe in nothing, are able to say in winter: "O yes, summer will come again," and are convinced that it will not be winter forever. Therefore you and everyone should learn to say in the midst of his winter: "Very well, let there be snow, frost, and freezing. No matter how bad things get, summer will come again. God will not let it snow and freeze forever," as we are told in Ps. 55:22: "He shall never suffer the righteous to be moved."

And then the psalmist tells us something even more comforting. Snow, rime, and frost, he says, are the Lord's. He Himself causes them, and they are not controlled by the devil or any hostile force. He commands them. Therefore they cannot be colder or freeze us more than He wishes or than we can bear, just as St. Paul taught the Corinthians that God does not let us be tempted beyond our endurance but directs the temptation so that we may be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:13). If the devil controlled the frost, there would not only be incessant winter and eternal frost with never again a summer; it would freeze so hard that we would all freeze to death in a single day and become nothing but chunks of ice. But God's winter and frost are not everlasting. And though the winter is hard and in itself hardly to be borne, still He gives us so much fire, warmth, straw, etc., that we can bear it until the summer puts an end to it.

David shows this with great finesse by comparing the snow to wool, frost to ashes, hail to morsels of food. How sharply and accurately this man has studied God's creation! Why does he not compare the hail to pebbles, frost to sand, and snow to water? Wasn't he able to find closer comparisons than these, which would then also fit together better? The first two are not too badly paired, but what is one to make of ice and morsels? Well, he is trying to comfort us. He wants to teach us the real nature of winter, so that we will love and praise God even for the winter itself.

He says that winter and frost are unbearable; but in order that you may see and understand how it can be borne and that it need not destroy you, God has drawn and formed signs in the snow, frost, and hail, which should comfort and teach you something different from what they threaten. Look! The form of snow is like wool, as if God wanted to say: "The snow shall not kill you; it signifies wool, and you shall have wool and warmth, so that you can endure the winter, and if not, then the snow itself shall turn to wool and not only symbolize it. Nor shall the frost kill you; it indicates ashes, which are the bed of fire where it is warm, so that you may know that you will not be left without warmth and thus will be able to overcome the frost. Neither shall the hailstones kill you; they indicate morsels of food, so that you may be assured that even in winter, when nothing grows, you shall not die of hunger but shall have something to eat."

Therefore these three things—wool, ashes, and morsels—are three prophets, not only proclaiming that the winter shall end and the summer come again with warmth and food but also, like three preachers, comforting and teaching that even in winter, before summer returns, there will be enough warmth and food to overcome the winter. Thus the coming summer is not only predicted and preformed in snow, frost, and hail by the symbols of wool, ashes, and morsels but is embodied right into winter, so that it is never entirely winter without a little summer in it. Whatever warmth and nourishment there is in winter is just so much of summer, just as the winter sun, although paler and weaker than the summer sun, nevertheless shines and warms. Such a portrait and picture is also painted for us in the clouds, where the rainbow tells us that we are safe from the Flood, etc.

This is now the fifth blessing: God gives us summer, even in the winter, besides the symbol and promise of summer in the form of snow, frost, and hail. But who notices these benefits? Who thanks Him for them? Of course, He uses the winter for His own glorification, so that He can demonstrate His power by so easily transforming such a cold, hard, unfruitful time into a luxuriant, pleasant, and joyous summer. But He also wants to teach and warn us at the same time to recognize His benefits and be thankful. For the winter teaches us plainly what a wonderful time the summer is—when we want to recognize it, that is, or our stony hearts permit us to notice it—and what praise and thanks we owe to God for it. But we are used to it, just as we are used to the sun itself; and such daily use of Coifs gifts

demeans them for us, making them insignificant and contemptible. The result is that we look on them as nothing, or at best as nothing special. But if we receive a gift of a hundred gulden from someone, we consider this a tremendous gift, and it gives us more pleasure than God with His whole summer and winter. Shame on you for such base lack of faith!

18. *He sends forth His Word, and melts them; He makes His wind blow, and the waters flow.*

We read that snow, hail, and frost must vanish, that, as is now stated, the summer must come again, and that the driving out of winter is not the work of man, just as snow, rime, or frost are not man's work. For they do not come when and as we like; but *He* speaks—that is, as I said before, *He* sends His Word, or speaks to the winter and commands it to retreat—and that is what happens forthwith; and snow, frost, and ice melt away.

Now in order that we may not only believe but also comprehend that God's Word alone melts the frost and snow and drives out the winter, it is done, as everyone must admit, without fire or heat, which we must use when we want to melt something. Nor does He use the sun, for ice usually freezes even harder after sunshine. Then, when all is frozen hardest, the snow is deepest, and the ice thickest, at that very moment there is a turning point; the weather breaks, and there is a mighty thaw. Guess how this comes about? What causes it? There has been no fire or heat before the thaw, but only the sharpest cold. Nor did the sun cause it, for the sun need not be shining; the thawing can take place even when the sun is not visible in the sky.

The only answer reason can make to this is: "The weather changes." Who changes it? This question it cannot answer. But David says God changes it, and he shows with what He changes it: not with fire or heat but with His Word. When He speaks His Word to the winter, the frost, and the snow, then their hold is broken, and His winds come and melt away in two or three days what it took a whole winter to freeze. Where would the world get enough wood and fire to melt the frost and ice of even one day, much less a whole winter's freezing? These are sheer miracles of God; but because one sees them every day, they are despised. No thanks is given for them.

Here, too, David says it is "His wind," just as before he said "His frosty For a very particular wind is necessary to bring about a thaw. Not every wind will suffice; God must produce and command it with His Word. Otherwise not all the bellows in the world or no amount of blowing would melt the snow or drive out the winter. But when God's proper wind comes, then there is a quick thaw even though there has been no preceding warmth to soften the snow and ice. Yes, at times the thawing wind is almost cold, so that God seems to be driving out cold with cold and winter with winter, to prove to men that it is not the work of any creature but of His Word and utterance. It was He who cooled the furnace for the three men in Babylon without cold and extinguished the fire without water, so that the fire was fire and still could not bum. It is all the same to Him whether He puts out fie with fie or warms cold with cold.

This is what astonishes David here and bids him praise God, who drives out winter so marvelously that He needs neither fie nor heat but only a cool wind or air. How could it be more marvelously done than that the air, which is really much thinner and softer than water, should nonetheless so easily break the hardest ice and turn it to water? Water could not do this. Therefore this wind is called God's wind and a very special wind, which, not by nature but by God's Word and command, so easily turns snow and ice to water.

And it is good that God takes a wind—not something else—to bring about the thawing, for thus the image and its spiritual significance are suited to each other. The winter of the spirit must also be driven out by nothing else than wind. This spiritual winter has two aspects. The fist is when the inner man is frozen in sin and has perished in its cold. There snow, frost, and ice are at their hardest. This winter is brought on by the Law, and by the devil with his temptations. Since this is not a sin against the Holy Spirit but involves only poor, troubled consciences, the snow is like wool, the frost like ashes, the ice like morsels. There is hope and promise that such a winter, as above, will be overcome, and that summer, namely, the forgiveness of sins, will come. And when the time is right, then the wind, the Holy Spirit, comes and blows the Gospel among such frozen sinners, forgives their sins, and comforts them. Then it thaws and flows, and the winter is gone.

The other aspect of this winter is when the outer man lies beneath the cross in deep distress. Our evil and malicious world causes this kind of winter; for it shows us no fie of love but only the frost of hate, and it intends simply to kill us off. But here, too, the snow is like wool, the frost like ashes, and the ice

like morsels. For there are always some faithful hearts who will love, feed, and help us until the wind of God comes in good time to release us from such frost or to convert the hearts of our enemies and make them friends, turning winter into summer, like Saul into St. Paul. In Scripture there are many such comforting promises, according to which the heathen who persecute Christians shall afterwards honor them, and the kings who have first raged against them shall become their caretakers and servants, having been softened and melted by the Spirit of God.²⁶

These are the truly wonderful miracles signified by nature's winter and summer. But it is the very devil that God never reaps any thanks for this! For where are those who praise and thank God for the balmy breeze of the Gospel, through which we have been thawed out from the terrible frost of papal tyranny, under which everything was frozen down to the very ground by God's permission, who sent us just such violent cold and error because of our own spitefulness? Well, God is used to it. His happiness has always consisted in doing good in the world, in return for which He must suffer ingratitude, forgetfulness, and even blasphemy, shame, and all kinds of malice, just as the Children of Israel did when they served other gods and killed His servants.

19. He declares His Word to Jacob, His statutes and ordinances to Israel.

Up to this point David has thanked God for the blessings of temporal goods and worldly conditions. Now he gives thanks for spiritual blessings, and they are incomparably greater than temporal goods, although not of such outward magnificence and not highly respected, namely, preaching and God's Word. This is the costly treasure which brings all blessedness, both in this life and the next, and brings it so abundantly that he who has it is happy even in the direst misery and poverty and would rather give up all he possesses, even life itself, and have this blessedness in death than live frivolously without it. But there are few who really have this.

Therefore David put this blessing at the end, where a song should sound best. Who can completely express the greatness of this gift? For who can exhaust all the virtue and power of God's Word? The Holy Scriptures, sermons, and all Christian books do nothing but praise God's Word, as we also do daily in our reading, writing, preaching, singing, poetizing, and painting.²⁷ This blessing abides and sustains us when the temporal blessings vanish and when through death we part from them and from one another. This blessing does not leave us or part from us; it goes through death with us, tears us out of it, and brings us to eternal life, where there is neither death nor fear of dying. But of this more later.

The psalmist gives us three names for God's Word. First he speaks of "His Word," then of "His statutes," and finally of "His ordinances," all of which we now want to distinguish. "Word" means God's promise, in which we are to believe; for promise and believing belong together before all other laws or works, "Statutes" are the order and manner of divine worship as it used to be, such as priesthood, temple, and altar, with their gestures, garments, sacrifices, dogmas, etc. "Ordinances" are the Law under which God commanded the people of Israel how to conduct themselves toward others and practice good works of love, as the commandments of the Second Table teach, together with those regulations which Moses deduced from them, as given particularly in Deuteronomy. These three must exist in every people that wants to be a people of God, just as we Christians also have the promise of the Gospel, the Sacraments, the office of the preaching ministry, and lastly, the doctrine of good works.

20. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know His ordinances.

The heathen were hostile to the Jews throughout the world, especially as neighbors, largely because the Jews gloried in being God's only people, thus damning all heathen as enemies of God. The devil cannot contain himself when he sees the people of God; he has to stir up the whole world against them. And those who desire to be God's people must accept the hostility of the whole world. On their part the heathen boasted of this and despised the Jews intensely, particularly because they saw that the Jews were such a small group and tiny kingdom as compared with all the heathen, who had great kingdoms and empires.

That is the subject of this verse, and David praises this prime blessing above all others, almost as if he were saying: "Very well, boast if you must. I admit that the heathen are equal or even far superior to us in the aforementioned blessings and temporal goods. They have stronger gates, more people and property, a broader peace, more and better wheat than we have. God gives them winter and summer, sun and rain, heaven and earth just as generously for their use, or even more generously than He does for us. But I know well that they cannot boast of this one thing, that is, that they have God's Word, and that the

Lord is their God and they are His people. This glory they must concede to us; they cannot imitate us here. We know and may certainly glory in this, that He is our God and we are His people. For we have His Word, which He gave to us and to no heathen.”

Furthermore, because they cannot glory in God or in His Word, they cannot really glory in the temporal and bodily blessings of God either. They do not even know that these things are gifts of God. Therefore they cannot thank Him for them but glory in their wealth and power as such, and not as gifts of God. This means that the wealth and property of which they boast in proud defiance are really their god. O miserable boasters, full of pride and defiance, who neither know nor have God, who neither have nor understand His blessings but turn the creature into gods whom they trust and praise! What would it profit the heathen even if each one owned a whole world, as long as he could not recognize it as a gift of God and had neither God nor His Word, acknowledging instead the world as his god, comfort, and confidence? I would rather have one city, or a house, a room, yes, even a pigsty, if only the Lord were my God, and the sty His gift. For what can he lack who has God or God’s Word, even if he had nothing else, or were like poor Lazarus, or even lay in death?

And again, when the heathen boast of their wealth and power, they are boasting as thieves and robbers boast of their loot and plunder, in fact, as enemies and blasphemers of God, and their glory is thus only shame. For because they possess God’s goods but do not acknowledge that they are God’s and come from Him and do not thank Him for them—all of which they do not know, because they do not keep His Word—therefore their wealth is no better than stolen and plundered goods, especially because, on top of everything else, they deny and blaspheme God and trust in other gods which they make from their own possessions. It is the same as if a prince were to grant land, and the vassal did not acknowledge receiving the land from the prince but denied, cursed, and persecuted him, and finally took another prince as liege lord. He would be a thief and a robber and an enemy of the prince while living on his very estate. This is why Ps. 76:4 calls such heathen kingdoms “mountains of prey,” for they steal their wealth and power from both God and the world.

On the other hand, a God-fearing David and God’s people may glory that they have robbed and stolen nothing. He confesses that it all belongs to God, who gives or lends to him all that he owns; therefore his own glory is purely the honor of being a loyal servant of God, whom he acknowledges, thanks, and serves. All this comes from having God’s Word, which enlightens and teaches one to recognize God and His blessings. Whether he has as much as the heathen, that is unimportant, because he has received his own with honor and grace from God, so that he sings with Ps. 37:16: “Better is a little that the righteous has than the abundance of many wicked.” For they have theirs in shame and dishonor before God, like robbers. Now I would rather have a penny as an honest man than many thousand gulden as a scoundrel. But the godless person does not bother about this. Money is his god, and he clings to it.

O that we could so glory and sing this verse! For we surely have God’s Word! The other crowd is defiant and boastful; they rely on emperors, kings, and princes, that is to say, on their own wealth and power. They have neither God nor His Word. Nor do they consider, or give thanks for, their riches as a gift of God; they make a god of their own wealth and power. Thieves and scoundrels before God, they rob and steal all that they have; they possess it all in shame and dishonor. Their boasting is vile and loathsome; for they deny, blaspheme, and persecute God, their liege lord, with all His servants and His whole kingdom. God grant them small success and fortune in their doings. Amen!—as He no doubt will anyway.

But we can boast that God has given us His Word. Let it happen that others are rich and we poor, they powerful and we weak, they happy and we sad, they admired and we despised, they alive and we dead, they everything and we nothing—what of it? Still they have no God but must make a worthless, miserable god out of their own pittance. What poor material for a god! O pitiable godsmiths! But we have God, and we glory in the right God. This ruby they must leave with us; in comparison with it all their kingdoms are rotten dung and dirt. Even though we must suffer much, what difference does it make? It is written that if you want to be a Christian, “My grace is sufficient for you (2 Cor. 12:9). Be grateful that you have My Word and Myself in My Word. How can distress, hunger, and pestilence hurt you? What damage can be done to you by the feuding of the bigwigs,²⁸ the malice of the peasants, the rage of the papists, the censure of the whole world, or the anger of all devils? You have God’s Word;

they don't! You are in My grace; they are not! You are My child; they are My enemies! Beloved, let My Word as Myself be a treasure, a kingdom, even a heavenly kingdom, to you in your poverty, misery, and woe. My Word is eternal, and in this Word you are eternal. Your²⁹ misery and their pride shall both pass away sooner than you think."

But note this in conclusion: David does not glory in the great miracle that God has performed on His people Israel, though this would be right and noble; he glories in God's Word. For among all the miracles, signs, and deeds the Word is certainly the greatest, the best, the most certain. Therefore do not forget that God's people are best identified and best comforted by their possession of God's Word, as David says here. In this he challenges the whole world and proclaims: "Go on; keep what you have. God will give to no other people what He has given reel They still do not have God's Word, nor do they want it. Furthermore, they are not worthy of it; for they persecute it and consider it an abomination. But it is my highest treasure and comfort. Therefore praise such a Lord, Jerusalem. Rejoice in such a God, Zion! Praise and rejoice, all things that have life! Amen."

THE SEVEN PENITENTIAL PSALMS

Translated by
ARNOLD GUEBERT

PSALM • 6

THE FIRST PENITENTIAL PSALM

1. *O Lord, rebuke me not in Thy anger, nor chasten me in Thy wrath.*
2. *Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are troubled.*
3. *My soul also is sorely troubled. But Thou, O Lord—how long?*
4. *Turn, O Lord, save my life; deliver me for the sake of Thy steadfast love.*
5. *For in death there is no remembrance of Thee; in hell who will give Thee thanks?*
6. *I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping.*
7. *My body wastes away because of my grief, it grows old because of all my foes.*
8. *Depart from me, all you workers of evil; for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping.*
9. *The Lord has heard my supplication; the Lord accepts my prayer.*
10. *All my enemies shall be ashamed and sorely troubled; they shall turn back, and be put to shame in a moment.*

PREFACE

AMONG my first booklets I also published at that time¹ the seven penitential psalms with an exposition. And although I still do not find anything wrong in it, yet I often missed the meaning of the text. This usually happens to all teachers at their first attempt. It was so with the venerable, holy fathers, who, as St. Augustine admits about himself, daily improved in writing and teaching.² So also this little book was acceptable and good enough at the time, because nothing better was at hand. Now, however, since the Gospel has reached high noon and is shining brightly, and I also have made some progress in the meantime, I considered it good to publish the work again, but improved and based more accurately on the right text.³ I commend all my readers to the grace of God. Amen.

1. *O Lord, rebuke me not in Thy anger, nor chasten me in Thy wrath.*

To explain this psalm several things must be noted:

First. In all trials and affliction man should first of all run to God; he should realize and accept the fact that everything is sent by God, whether it comes from the devil or from man. This is what the prophet does here. In this psalm he mentions his trials, but first he hurries to God and accepts these trials from Him; for this is the way to learn patience and the fear of God. But he who looks to man and does not accept these things from God becomes impatient and a despiser of God.

Second. God chastens in two ways. At times He does so in grace as a kind Father, temporally; at times He does so in wrath as a stern Judge, eternally. Now when God seizes man, man is by nature weak and disheartened, because he does not know whether God is taking him in hand out of anger or in grace. In fear of His anger he begins to cry out: "O Lord, rebuke me not in Thy anger; let it be in grace and temporally; be a Father, not a Judge." Thus also St. Augustine says: "O God, bear down here, strike here, beat here; but spare us in yonder life."⁴ Thus he implores here, not that he wants to go unpunished altogether, for this would not be a good sign, but that he be punished as a child by his father. However, that these words are spoken by a sinner or in the person of a sinner follows from the fact that he mentions punishment. For God's punishment is not sent for the sake of righteousness. Therefore all saints and Christians must recognize themselves as sinners and fear God's wrath, for this psalm is general and excludes no one. Therefore woe to all those who do not fear, do not feel their own sins, and walk about smugly in the face of the awful judgment of God, before whom no good work can avail!

2. *Be gracious to me, O Lord.*

That is, show me grace, so that I do not dissolve and despair in fear and terror.

O Lord, heal me.

That is, strengthen me; help me in this wretchedness.

For my bones are troubled.

That is: “All my strength and power passes away at the terror of Thy punishment. Since, therefore, my strength leaves me, give me Thy strength.” And here it must be noted that this psalm and others like it will never be thoroughly understood or prayed unless disaster stares man in the face as it does in death and at the final departure. Blessed are they who experience this in life, for every man must finally meet his end. When man thus declines and becomes as nothing in all his power, works, and being, until there is nothing but a lost, condemned and forsaken sinner, then divine help and strength appear, as in Job 11:11–17: “When you think you are devoured, then you shall shine forth as the morning star.”

3. My soul also is sorely troubled.

God’s strength and consolation are given to no one unless he asks for it from the bottom of his heart. But no one who has not been profoundly terrified and forsaken prays profoundly. He does not know what ails him, and he remains secure in the strength and consolation of another, his own or that of creatures. In order, therefore, that God might dispense His strength and consolation and communicate it to us, He withdraws all other consolation and makes the soul deeply sorrowful, crying and longing for His comfort. Thus all God’s chastisements are graciously designed to be a blessed comfort, although through weak and despairing hearts the foolish hinder and distort the design aimed at them, because they do not know that God hides and imparts His goodness and mercy under wrath and chastisement.

But Thou, O Lord—how long?

Time seems long to all who are afflicted; and on the other hand, it seems short to those who are happy. But it seems especially and immeasurably long to those who have that inner hurt of the soul, the feeling of being forsaken and rejected by God. It is sometimes said that one hour in purgatory is worse than a thousand years of temporal, bodily pain. Thus there is no greater pain than the gnawing pangs of conscience, which occur when God withholds truth, righteousness, wisdom, etc., and nothing remains but sin, darkness, pain, and woe. This is a sample or foretaste of the pains of hell and everlasting damnation; therefore it pierces the very bones, strength, blood, marrow, and whatever there is in man.

4. Turn, O Lord, save my life.

A turning away on the part of God implies an inner rejecting and forsaking. Then a horrible terror and, as it were, the beginning of damnation is felt, as is written in Ps. 30:7: “Thou didst hide Thy face, I was dismayed.”

Returning, however, implies inner consolation and a sustaining in joyous hope. Therefore he says: “Save my life,” as if he were saying: “It is cast down and condemned; draw or tear it upward again.”

Deliver me.

For this is the severest and greatest illness of the soul, where it must perish eternally if it should remain in such a state.

For the sake of Thy steadfast love.

Not because of any merit or worthiness in me but on account of Thy mercy, that it may be extolled, loved, and praised; for Thou hast sent it to help the unworthy. For he whom God helps according to his own merit is more highly honored and praised than God’s goodness. That would be a great dishonor; hence God’s grace is to be praised, and all merit and worthiness brought to naught. That is what this temptation does.

5. For in death there is no remembrance of Thee.

That is, the dead do not praise Thee and do not extol Thy mercy; only the living do this, as we read in Ps. 115:17–18:⁵ “The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence; but we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.” Therefore here the psalmist speaks not only of temporal death but also of spiritual death, when the soul is dead. For sin is the death of the soul, and pain is its hell. Both are felt by one who lies in this distress, namely, in sin and in punishment for sin. Therefore he says: “Do not let me remain in death and hell; but according to Thy mercy graciously raise me up, deliver me from hell, and console me.” Thus this verse makes us understand that this tribulation is a door and entrance into eternal sin and punishment, that is, into death and hell, as King Hezekiah says: “I have said in great terror: I must enter the gates of hell in the midst of my days, that is, when I thought I was in the best years of my life” (Is. 38:10).

In hell who will give Thee thanks?

Therefore I have said, “for Thy mercy’s sake!” Hell, where Thy mercy does not dwell, does not praise Thee; it really desecrates and blasphemes Thy justice and truth. This is by far the noblest thought which the saints have in their crosses and by which they are also sustained. Otherwise they are in every way like the damned, as we read later in the last of these psalms: “Hide not Thy face from me, lest I be like those who go down to the pit” (Ps. 143:7). The difference is this, that the saints retain a good will toward God, and that they are more concerned about losing God’s gracious will, praise, and honor than about being damned. For he does not say: “In hell there is no joy and pleasure” but rather: “There is no praise and honor.” Therefore here he inserts the thought that God is well disposed toward no one in hell, and if he goes to hell, he, like the condemned, would be in God’s disfavor. This would be more unwelcome and painful to him than the pain itself. Therefore we read in the Song of Solomon that the love of God is as strong as death and as firm as hell, because it remains even in deathly and hellish pain (8:6). Thus God says through Isaiah: “I will bridle you with My love, that you do not perish” (48:9). That is: “I will grant you a sincerely favorable disposition toward Me in the midst of your suffering, and this will restrain you and keep you. Without this all others perish in their trials.”

Again, in Ps. 18:3: “I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies.” We must overcome afflictions, death, and hell. However, they will not be overcome by running away or by impatience, but with favor, good will, and love continuing toward God in their presence. These are sharp words for the old Adam, especially if he is still fresh and green; but that does not matter.

6. I am weary with my moaning.

That is: “I groan so much and so intensely that even groaning is labor. My life has become painful and wearisome, for it is nothing but groaning.” The saying goes: “I have worked and labored with running, with smiting, etc.” So also here: “I belabored myself with groaning; I am restless with groaning.”

Every night I flood my bed with tears.

That is, I weep so much that my tears flood my bed, as we read in the following:

I drench my couch with my weeping.

This is not really possible, nor has anyone ever heard or read that it has happened to a saint. Hence the words are spoken figuratively and must be understood in a figurative sense, namely, that his soul is so severely burdened with affliction that, if it were possible for the body, he would weep that much. Therefore, so far as he is concerned, it is as if it had happened. And if his body were to act like a soul which thoroughly feels the chastisement of God, he would melt and dissolve like snow in less than an hour.

7. My body wastes away because of my grief.

That is, my appearance and the whole mode of life of my body are changed and misshapen; and all this on account of the wrath of God which I have felt. The world cares for the body with silk, gold, and sumptuous eating, like the rich man in the Gospel (Luke 16:19–20); but through the wrath of God I have become the poor and deformed Lazarus.

It grows old because of all my foes.

That is, I am useless, like an old man. For such a feeling of the chastisement of God has the effect that all strength is consumed. It seems to him that heaven and earth are laid upon him and that everyone is his enemy. Nowhere does he find comfort; he finds only terror and the wrath of God.⁶

8. Depart from me, all you workers of evil.

That this does not mean all kinds of unjust persons, but those of outstanding virtue and wisdom, is clear from Matt. 7:22, where the Lord Jesus quotes this half of the verse against those who on the Last Day will say: “Yes, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name and do many mighty works?” These wise and holy ones are called workers of evil by Christ because they do not perform the good in the right way. And now he attacks the proud holy ones who have never felt the wrath of God or come to a knowledge of their sins. Therefore they do not believe, trust, call upon, know, or teach the goodness of God; but they mislead themselves and others through works and the bold presumption of merit before God. He wishes that these, too, would have to experience the wrath of God, so that they would finally recover from their bold presumption and regain their senses.

For the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping.

That is, God is so disposed that He gladly hears those who cry and lament, but not those who feel smug and independent. Therefore the good life does not consist in outward works and appearances but in a lamenting and sorrowful spirit, as we read in the fourth of these psalms (51:17): “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.” And again (Ps. 34:18): “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted.” Therefore weeping is preferred to working, and suffering exceeds all doing.

9. *The Lord has heard my supplication; the Lord accepts my prayer.*

These words refer to a soul that is poor in spirit and has nothing left but crying, imploring, and praying in firm faith, strong hope, and steadfast love. The life and behavior of every Christian should be so constituted that he does not know or have anything but God, and in no other way than in faith. Therefore those who are not like this are not heard by God, for they do not call with the heart. They are not poor, nor are they in need of calling and praying; for they are sated and filled.

10. *All my enemies shall be ashamed and sorely troubled.*

That is, they stand there in their sense of well-being as a threat and a menace, and they glory in themselves as if all were well with them. O God, they do not know how devoid of all blessing they are! It would be good for them if they came to their senses and realized how very shameful and poor they are in the sight of God. For the proud in spirit and the worldly-wise cannot but be satisfied with themselves, feel secure, esteem themselves highly, never feel foolish, always say the right thing, do the right thing, have holy intentions, stand out among others, and acknowledge few as their equals. This is the greatest blindness on earth; for to the extent that they think, esteem, and consider themselves great in these things, to that extent they are despised and dishonored before God. It is the psalmist’s wish that they realize this, for they would be different if they came to their senses and were terrified at themselves.

They shall turn back.

For they have turned away to their own affairs and departed from God too profoundly and too far.

And be put to shame in a moment.

That is, inwardly, in their own eyes, since they hold themselves in such high honor, And also outwardly before men, if this is necessary for the inner feeling; otherwise the outward behavior alone, without the inner, is unfruitful and harmful.

PSALM • 32

THE SECOND PENITENTIAL PSALM

1. *Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.*
2. *Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*
3. *When I declared not my sin, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.*
4. *For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*
Selah.
5. *I acknowledged my sin to Thee, and I did not hide my iniquity. I said: I will confess my transgressions to the Lord. Then Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin. Selah.*
6. *Therefore all those who are holy will offer prayer to Thee in the right time, in the rush of great waters; they shall not reach him.*
7. *Thou art a hiding place for me; Thou preservest me from trouble; Thou dost encompass me with deliverance. Selah.*
8. *I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you.*
9. *Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not keep with you.*
10. *Many are the pangs of the wicked; but steadfast love surrounds him who trusts in the Lord.*
11. *Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!*

1. *Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven.*

THIS is as if he were saying: “No one is without unrighteousness; before God all are unrighteous, even those who practice works of righteousness and imagine that thus they can escape from unrighteousness; for no one can rescue himself. Therefore blessed are they—not those who have no sin or work their own way out but only those whom God forgives by grace. But who are they? Verses six and seven will teach us who they are.

Whose sin is covered.

Nor is anyone without transgression, as God clearly sees in all of us. Blessed, however, are those whose sin He covers, does not see, does not remember, does not want to know about, but completely forgives by grace. They are those who do not cover, remit, forgive, and forget their sins themselves. They look at, recognize, remember, and judge them.

2. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity.

That is, not blessed but unblessed is he who does not impute sins to himself, is well pleased with himself, thinks himself pious, has no qualms of conscience, considers himself innocent, and takes this for his comfort and hope. The apostle says (1 Cor. 4:4): "I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted." This is the same as saying: "Blessed is he to whom God does not impute sin, of whose sin God is not mindful." They are those who constantly impute manifold sins and transgressions to themselves.

In whose spirit there is no deceit.

That is, his own heart does not betray him, so that outwardly he seems to be righteous and considers himself altogether pious and a lover of God, while inwardly this notion is false, and he serves God and is pious, not for God's sake but for his own sake. This evil, false, and deceitful guile seduces, above all, the outstanding, conspicuous, and spiritual people, who, because of their pious life and many good deeds, stand up boldly and do not recognize their inner, spiritual attitude. Nor will they take to heart the fact that this deceptive and harmful trickery spares no one but is the basic spirit of all men and can be driven out only by the grace of God. Therefore he calls it deceit of the spirit, not a deception which a person commits or deliberately devises against himself or against another, but one which he bears and with which he is born. This can be covered and adorned with a good life, so that man begins to think he is pure and free, while beneath lies the wicked filth which theologians call "self-love."⁷ Thus a man is pious out of fear of hell or hope of heaven, not because of God. But this is difficult to recognize and still more difficult to overcome. Indeed, it is impossible except through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Now it must be noted here that the prophet mentions four kinds of evil, namely, "unrighteousness," "iniquity," "sin," and "deceit." To differentiate: "Unrighteousness" implies that man is not pious before God when he is stripped of what he should have, namely, piety and good works. This is the first evil. The second is "iniquity." This refers to the wicked deeds which follow as the second evil after the first. Thus theft, adultery, betrayal, and the like may be the result of poverty, and this includes good works done after the loss and in the absence of true piety, which is born of grace. The third, "sin," is the evil in our nature which has remained and always remains when iniquity and unrighteousness occur. It is the evil lust, love, and fear which have grown and have been born into our very being. It provokes the first two and is the prevalent sin of our time. In itself it is deadly unless God in His grace removes it from those who repent and desire to be healed of it. Therefore the psalmist says that God does not impute them. As if he were saying: "The sins are there, but God in His grace does not charge them." Therefore it is daily present and becomes deadly as soon as man becomes proud and does not repent without ceasing. Thus it is deceit and subtle cunning for all who practice good works and consider themselves pious, thinking that now they are pure, and not believing that by grace God's goodness does not impute their iniquity.

3. When I declared not my sin.

That is, I did not want to recognize or acknowledge my sin. I thought I was pious. I did not see the deceit of it.

My bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

That is, I had no peace but always a burdened and evil conscience, which made me weak and miserable and left me no rest, because I did not confess the sin or search for grace.

4. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me.

This is due to an evil conscience, which envisions only God's wrath, as if He were standing over me with a club; hence there can be no peace of heart.

My strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah.

For this burden causes heart, courage, and mind to dry up, with the result that man fails also in body.

5. I acknowledged my sin to Thee.

Now I see that there is nothing better than to confess before Thee that there is only sin in me and nothing good, so that only Thy grace may be praised and desired, and all pride and trust in merit and good works may cease.

And I did not hide my iniquity.

This is in contrast to those in whom deceit of the spirit produces such false confidence that they can unabashedly justify and excuse themselves. Because of this they get into quarrels with other people and lapse into pride, anger, hatred, impatience, condemning, and slander. Their innocence makes them really guilty, and yet they claim to have done justly and rightly and to have acted fairly. They conceal deeply their own iniquity, for they look at their own righteousness and do not confess their sins to God sincerely and without deceit of the inner spirit. Righteous people, however, do not hide their iniquity, do not become angry, do not grow impatient even when they are wronged; for they do not feel that they can be wronged, since they find no righteousness in themselves. These are the blessed to whom God remits iniquity and cancels it because they confess it. Since they do not hide and cover their sin, God covers and hides it.

I said:

That is, now I see that one must speak and act thus; it cannot be otherwise. As if he were saying: "Thou art so gracious, and Thou hearest true acknowledgment and humble confession so gladly that Thou at once comfortest and liftest up as soon as man decides to humble himself. As soon as he realizes that he is a sinner and brings his complaint to Thee, he is justified and acceptable to Thee."

I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.

That is: "I will rebuke myself; then God will praise me. I will degrade myself; then God will honor me. I will accuse myself; then God will acquit me. I will speak against myself; then God will speak for me. I will speak of my guilt; then He will speak about my merit, as he did to Mary Magdalene in the house of Simon the leper (Luke 7:44–47)."

Then Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin. Selah.

Thou forgavest because I have taken an account of my iniquity and confessed it.

6. Therefore all those who are holy will offer prayer to Thee.

That is, they will be holy because they confess their iniquity to Thee and ask for grace; and note, *to Thee!* For although they may appear holy before men, they do not consider this; but they fear Thy judgment, and they know that their holiness is nothing in Thy sight. They wait humbly for Thy grace.

In the right time.

This is whenever man realizes what he is, or in the time of grace. That is the opportune time to ask, as the prophet Isaiah says (49:8): "In a time of favor I have answered you," the time in which the saints are when God touches and visits them with the light of grace.

In the rush of great waters.

That is, that person is holy⁸ who stands, not on his own holiness but on the Rock of Thy righteousness, which is Christ. Everyone who is his own accuser, punisher, and judge is founded on Him when many blows and cruel tribulations come over him like a great flood of water, or when he is persecuted on account of his humble life.

They shall not reach him.

That is, they will not harm him in his soul, even if he must lose life and limb.

7. Thou art a hiding place for me.

In all these onrushing waters of affliction Thou art my Rock on which I stand so that they do not drown and devour me.

Thou preservest me from trouble.

Afflictions round about, those are the waters.

Thou dost encompass me with deliverance. Selah.

This means, that I may praise Thy grace, overcome the affliction, and be saved.

8. I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go.

This is where I want you to be. You ask that I deliver you. Then do not be uneasy about it; do not teach Me, and do not teach yourself; surrender yourself to Me. I am competent to be your Master. I will lead you in a way that is pleasing to Me. You think it wrong if things do not go as you feel they should. But your thinking harms you and hinders Me. Things must go, not according to your understanding but

above your understanding. Submerge yourself in a lack of understanding, and I will give you My understanding. Lack of understanding is real understanding; not knowing where you are going is really knowing where you are going. My understanding makes you without understanding. Thus Abraham went out from his homeland and did not know where he was going (Gen. 12:1 ff.). He yielded to My knowledge and abandoned his own knowledge; and by the right way he reached the right goal. Behold, that is the way of the cross. You cannot find it, but I must lead you like a blind man. Therefore not you, not a man, not a creature, but I, through My Spirit and the Word, will teach you the way you must go. You must not follow the work which you choose, not the suffering which you devise, but that which comes to you against your choice, thoughts, and desires. There I call; there you must be a pupil; there it is the time; there your Master has come; there you must not be a horse or an irrational animal. If you follow Me and forsake yourself, behold, then

I will counsel you with My eye upon you.

“I will not leave you; you shall not go down and perish; I will not forget you. Your eyes shall be closed because My eyes are open over you. Have you not read (Ps. 34:15) that ‘the eyes of God are toward the righteous,’ and that Mt. Moriah is called ‘the Lord shall behold’ (Gen. 22:14)? Surely I alone shall see, just as I did when Abraham failed to see; and yet he did not fail to see.” In brief, God wants us to have a true, simple faith and firm trust, confidence, and hope. While faith, hope, humility, and patience are not mentioned by name in these words, yet the mode and the true nature of such virtue are expressed. There are many who write about virtues, but they praise their names rather than teach their nature.⁹

9. Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding.

“These are the people who do not let Me rule. Like dumb animals, they obey where they agree; and where they do not agree or approve, they do not obey. They do not understand the Spirit. For horses and mules were not made to understand things that are beyond the senses; hence they are not moved to love or sorrow. And those human beings who will not do, avoid, or suffer anything unless they can measure, grasp, feel, or examine it cannot grasp My understanding. In their reason they are like horses with their senses; both go no farther than to act according to impulse.”

Which must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not keep with you.

That is to say: “I do not like those who must be forced by law, like animals with a bridle, but those who serve Me freely and willingly without the pressure of the Law, in spirit and in love.”

10. Many are the pangs of the wicked.

These are they who rule themselves and do not want God’s rule. They act only according to their own judgment. And yet they think they respect and honor God in the best possible way, as the most obedient, the most pious, and the most righteous; for they have good intentions and consider right what their good intention suggests. God always opposes them, for they are of a proud spirit and are not obedient to the will of God. Hence they will suffer much and have many sorrows. It is all in vain, without merit and comfort; for they do not have a good conscience, but only sorrow and labor in their good life, to which the Law and a heavy and evil conscience drive them as horses and mules are driven.

But steadfast love surrounds him who trusts in the Lord.

The others are surrounded by the judgment and wrath of God, from which they receive much misfortune and no good fortune; for they depend on themselves and set their hopes on their own good intentions. In like manner, the righteous, who do not rely or smugly depend on themselves or their good intentions, are embraced by goodness, and this brings them good fortune and many blessings. Therefore he concludes concerning them:

11. Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous.

That is, you may rejoice in the Lord, you who trust in the Lord, who do not trust or rejoice in yourselves but rather despair of yourselves and are sorrowful, who are your own enemies and find no satisfaction in your own opinion.

And shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

That is, be bold and courageous; rise up and sing praises; be of good cheer, like a man who shouts for joy. For the heart that is right with God and is not wrapped up in itself or in something other than God is founded on the eternal good and stands firm. Therefore it has an abundance out of which it can praise, glory, strut, and boast, as the apostle says (1 Cor. 1:31): “Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.”

But the warped souls, absorbed in themselves with false opinions and deceptive good intentions, glory in themselves and not in God.

PSALM • 38

THE THIRD PENITENTIAL PSALM

1. *O Lord, rebuke me not in Thy anger, nor chasten me in Thy wrath!*
2. *For Thy arrows have sunk into me, and Thy hand has come down on me.*
3. *There is no soundness in my flesh because of Thy indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin.*
4. *For ray iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.*
5. *My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness.*
6. *I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning.*
7. *For my loins are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in ray flesh.*
8. *I am utterly spent and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart.*
9. *Lord, all my longing is known to Thee, my sighing is not hidden from Thee.*
10. *My heart throbs, my strength fails me; and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me.*
11. *My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my kinsmen stand afar off.*
12. *Those who seek my life lay their snares, those who seek my hurt speak of ruin, and meditate treachery all the day long.*
13. *But I am like a deaf man, I do not hear, like a dumb man who does not open his mouth.*
14. *Yea, I am like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no rebukes.*
15. *But for Thee, O Lord, do I wait; it is Thou, O Lord my God, who wilt answer.*
16. *For I pray: Only let them not rejoice over me, who boast against me when my foot slips!*
17. *For I am made for trouble, and my pain is ever with me.*
18. *I confess my iniquity, and I am sorry for my sin.*
19. *But my foes live and are mighty, and many are those who hate me wrongfully.*
20. *Those who render me evil for good are my adversaries because I follow after good.*
21. *Do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me!*
22. *Make haste to help me, O Lord, my Salvation!*

THIS psalm portrays most clearly the manner, words, acts, thoughts, and gestures of a truly penitent heart.

1. O Lord, rebuke me not in Thy anger.

The chastisement is understood by means of words, as one rebukes an evildoer.

Nor chasten me in Thy wrath!

This is done with deeds, as is written in Ps. 2:5: “Then will He speak to them in His wrath (i. e., rebuke in wrath), and in His fury will He terrify them (i. e., punish with acts and deeds).”

2. For Thy arrows have sunk into me.

The words with which God rebukes and threatens in Scripture are arrows. Whoever feels them cries out: “O Lord, rebuke me not in Thy anger.” However, only he feels them into whose heart they are thrust and whose conscience is terrified. It is the sensitive into whose heart God shoots the arrows. From the smug, who have become hardened, the arrows glance off as from a hard stone. And this continues as long as the words are spoken by the preaching of man without the co-operation and the inner penetration of God.

And Thy hand has come down on me.

That is, not only Thy angry words and threats penetrate deeply into my heart, but also Thy angry deeds are always over me and oppress me.

3. There is no soundness in my flesh because of Thy indignation.

That is, as is written in the first of these psalms (6:2): “Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing”; for the flesh is weak and sick when it comes to suffering; it cannot bear the hand and the acts of the punishment of God.

There is no health in my bones.

For God’s wrath terrifies me to such an extent that my bones shiver and my flesh and marrow fade away.

Because of my sin.

Because of the consciousness of my sin. For the arrows of God and His angry words make real the sin within the heart. This causes restlessness and terror in the conscience and in all the powers of the soul, and it makes the body sick throughout. Where this is the case, things are right with man; for the same thing happened to Christ.

4. For my iniquities have gone over my head.

That is, they have subdued me altogether and are greater and stronger than I am. This is due to the arrows which make sins so manifold, so great, and so strong that man can neither help nor counsel himself but lies there utterly helpless.

They weigh like a burden too heavy for me.

That is, heavier than I can bear, as is written in Ps. 65:3: "Lord God, the deed of our sin has overwhelmed us; be gracious toward our iniquity." Thus our sin treads us underfoot until grace comes, treads sin underfoot, and raises our head above it so that we become master and rule over sin, not sin over us. Those, however, who lie in sin, who are either dead or too holy, do not sense these things. Therefore it is an amazing thing: He who has no sin feels and has it, and he who has sin does not feel it and has none. For it would be impossible for him to complain about and against sin if he did not live in righteousness and grace. One devil does not drive out the other (Luke 11:18); sin does not accuse its kind; and one wolf does not cry out against the other. And yet it is impossible for him who cries out against sin to be without it, for he dare not speak to God in fiction. It must be true that he has sin, as he says, and yet also true that he is without sin. Just as Christ was at the same time truly alive and dead, so also those who are real Christians must be full of sin and without sin at the same time.

5. My wounds grow foul and fester.

Just as wounds and swellings of the body decay, fester, and stink, so also the evil sores of human nature get worse and begin to stink if they are not treated and healed daily with the ointment of grace and the water of the Word of God. Now others go on smugly, not heeding these sores, just as though they were well. Therefore this follows:

Because of my foolishness.

Because of my present situation. For wisdom is the salt and water that cleanses the wounds, and this wisdom is none other than thoroughly knowing oneself, as Prov. 11:2 says: "With the humble is wisdom." For insight will not permit a man to let himself be destroyed. But it is foolishness when a man does not know himself but imagines he is altogether well. The arrows, however, reveal this foolishness that man may realize how blind he has been in knowing himself. Hence this is the meaning: When I recognized my own foolishness and lack of self-understanding, I also recognized how very foul and stinking my wounds really are. Formerly, in my foolishness, I did not see this. Therefore

6. I am utterly bowed down and prostrate.

He is just like a man who is griefstricken and ill at ease. He has a sad expression outwardly. He bows his head downward and has no desire to raise his head, to see, hear, or speak, but directs his eyes to the ground.

All the day I go about mourning.

These are true signs of real repentance for sin, just as the publican in the Gospel did not dare raise his eyes (Luke 18:13) but considered himself evil and bowed down to the ground, more with his heart than with his body.

7. For my loins are filled with burning.

That is, I am inwardly so full of fear that I could die of thirst; so parched am I because of my affliction. Thus it happens to all who experience great fear and terror. Prov. 31:6: "Give strong drink to him who is perishing."

And there is no soundness in my flesh.

As stated above, the body cannot bear such terror of conscience; not even the bones.

8. I am utterly spent and crushed.

As a sorrowful heart that is utterly crushed by such terror of conscience.

I groan because of the tumult of my heart.

Just as a lion cries out and roars, so it is when the heart is so full of affliction and moaning that it cannot contain itself but breaks forth in miserable wailing.

9. Lord, all my longing is known to Thee, my sighing is not hidden from Thee.

That is, my longing is so great that I cannot express it in words and cannot pray. My heart, Thou dost see it; what more can I say? My sorrow is greater than my sighing can ever be. The first of these psalms also says this (6:6): “I am weary with my moaning.”

10. *My heart throbs.*

If the heart throbs and quakes before the great anger of God, these are all signs of great terror.

My strength fails me.

That is, all my strength is gone, and in all things I am weak and despondent. Thus Christ also says in Ps. 22:14–15: “My heart is like melting wax, and My strength is dried up.” This is due to the arrows; they cause this inner misery.

And the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me.

That is, my countenance is not lighted up and happy but looks sour, sorrowful, and dark.

11. *My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague.*

That is, I have become an object of horror even to my friends. They flee from my misery, as the psalmist says elsewhere (31:11): “My relatives flee from me”; for they are so terrified at the wrath of God upon me that they dare not even comfort me.

My kinsmen stand afar off.

They are watching to see how it will turn out, and they refuse to befriend me, for fear of being punished with me by the tyrants who persecute me.

12. *Those who seek my life lay their snares.*

Here he points out the source of his afflictions. He is attacked outwardly by tyrants and evil people for the sake of God’s Word and His justice. This makes him tremble inwardly and fear the wrath of God. Then all the old sins appear which he otherwise never felt or remembered, and which have become foul. Misfortune never comes alone.

Those who seek my hurt speak of ruin, and meditate treachery all the day long.

That is, they attack me with lies and false accusations and invent things against me to destroy me.

13. *But I am like a deaf man, I do not hear, like a dumb man who does not open his mouth.*

That is, I must let them prevail and must keep silence like a stick; for my speech and reply does not count or help.

14. *Yea, I am like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no rebukes.*

In addition, I must let them go unrebuked, must keep my mouth shut and be in the wrong; for they do not hear; they rage and refuse to be told anything.

15. *But for Thee, O Lord, do I wait; it is Thou, O Lord my God, who wilt answer.*

These are words of a true and strong faith, which in time of trouble lets everything else go and clings to the Word and grace of God, and does not doubt that God will hear and help him. Yet he does not prescribe to God the time or manner but simply says: “Thou wilt answer; I will hope and continue to hope.”

16. *For I pray: Only let them not rejoice over me, who boast against me when my foot slips!*

My concern has been, and I thought to myself: “Would to God that they did not rejoice over me!

“Let them not prevail in the end! Rather let it be as is written in the first of these psalms (6:10), that they are disgraced and must be ashamed.”

Slipping of the foot means to suffer defeat and not to be able to stand. That is to say: “Therefore I hope in Thee, for trouble forces me to it. If they should win out, then I would be forever mocked by them, and they would prevail. I am worried and fearful about this, for then also Thy Word would be mockery.”

This verse shows how a troubled man worries and frets because the wicked fare so well. He thinks that they will continue to do so, while he is completely ruined. But God does not permit this. If they do prosper so that they think they have succeeded, He casts them down and makes the righteous joyful.

17. *For I am made for trouble, and my pain is ever with me.*

The heart which must suffer one affliction after another speaks and thinks: “O God, there is no end of trouble! when one stops, another begins. I see I am made for trouble and must always be miserable.” Ps. 34:19: “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.”

18. *I confess my iniquity.*

That is, such affliction is not unjust, for thereby my old Adam must be cleansed of his sin and be put to death.

I am sorry for my sin.

That is, as is written in the fourth, the next of these psalms (51:3): “My sin is ever before me, and my sin I will confess.” That has the same meaning as this verse. The wise, righteous, and proud saints are prone to accept peace and rest, comfort and honor; they see nothing to cause them sorrow and pain. They are always pleased and satisfied with themselves; for they hide their sin and do not publish it, do not even think of it, but think only of their own piety and the sins of others, as the following verse says. A really sincere person, on the other hand, is altogether different, as the holy apostle Paul says in Rom. 7:8, that sin dwells in him and in sin he lies captive, although outwardly he has done no evil but much good. Also Christ commands His own to hate their souls (John 12:25). Now there is nothing to hate but sin. And how do sins come into the pious that they should hate them? For He does not say that they should hate only past sins which are forgiven and atoned for, but the soul and life which evidently is still in them. This sin the proud righteous do not take into account at all; they go on smugly and say that these are daily sins and not against God’s command.¹⁰ If this were true, why does He say they should be hated? And why does the apostle complain that he is their prisoner (Rom. 7:23)? They claim that against daily sins there is no command and that these do not ensnare anyone.

19. But my foes live and are mighty, and many are those who hate me wrongfully.

That is, I suffer much and am troubled, as Jer. 12 and Hab. 1 describe it; for here “live” means to have good clays and live well. They are mighty and strong, but I am continually oppressed. They are honored, I am dishonored; they have peace, I have discord. They increase and have many who are friendly to them, praise them, and side with them. I alone am forsaken, and no one stays with me or is friendly toward me. Thus the really true saint is entirely different and widely separated from the apparent and the false, deceived saints.

20. Those who render me evil for good are my adversaries because I follow after good.

Those who think themselves wise and righteous cannot help but repay evil for good. For they persecute and repay with hatred and torture the true doctrine that one teaches them and by which, as it should be, one tells them that which is best and most useful. Besides, they slander and malign all who seek that good thing and follow after it. That is because this very good is not apparent but is under the cross, lowly, and hidden in God. But they refuse to become lowly in their life and appearance. They want to be somebody or want to rage and create havoc, and yet they think they do well. But it is real evil, and they destroy themselves. This the child of God avoids. Therefore they speak evil against him.

21. Do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me!

“I am lonely, forsaken by all and despised. Do Thou receive me, and do not forsake me.” It is God’s nature to make something out of nothing; hence one who is not yet nothing, out of him God cannot make anything. Man, however, makes something else out of that which exists; but this has no value whatever. Therefore God accepts only the forsaken, cures only the sick, gives sight only to the blind, restores life only to the dead, sanctifies only the sinners, gives wisdom only to the unwise. In short, He has mercy only on those who are wretched, and gives grace only to those who are not in grace. Therefore no proud saint, no wise or righteous person, can become God’s material, and God’s purpose cannot be fulfilled in him. He remains in his own work and makes a fictitious, pretended, false, painted saint of himself, that is, a hypocrite.

22. Make haste to help me, O Lord, my Salvation!

Make haste to help me, for all others hasten to destroy me For God’s help is not where man’s help is, nor even where there is no persecution of man, nor where man is not against himself. For God is not a Father of the rich but of the poor, widows, and orphans. The rich He has left alone (Luke 1:53). “O God of my salvation,” that is, that I seek no help or salvation either in myself or in anyone else, but only in Thee. Thus also Ps. 4:1: “The God of my righteousness has heard me,” that is, He is the one who gives help. The proud in spirit have their salvation, help, and satisfaction in themselves. Their help is not the help of God. They have devised it for themselves so that they may not be damned, and they refuse to admit that they are damned.

PSALM • 51

THE FOURTH PENITENTIAL PSALM

1. *Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy steadfast love; according to Thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.*
2. *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!*
3. *For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.*
4. *Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in Thy sight, so that Thou art justified in Thy sentence and blameless in Thy judgment.*
5. *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*
6. *Behold, Thou desirest truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*
7. *Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*
8. *Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones which Thou hast broken rejoice.*
9. *Hide Thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.*
10. *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*
11. *Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.*
12. *Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.*
13. *Then I will teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners will return to Thee.*
14. *Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, Thou God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of Thy righteousness.*
15. *O Lord, open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise.*
16. *For Thou hast no delight in sacrifice; were I to give a burnt offering, Thou wouldst not be pleased.*
17. *The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.*
18. *Do good to Zion in Thy good pleasure; build Thou the walls of Jerusalem.*
19. *Then wilt Thou delight in sacrifices of righteousness, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on Thy altar.*

1. *Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy steadfast love.*

ATRUE and penitent heart sees nothing but its sin and misery of conscience. He who still finds any counsel and help in himself cannot in all earnestness speak these words; for he is not yet altogether miserable but feels some comfort in himself, apart from God's mercy. The sense, then, is this: "O God, no man or creature can help or comfort me, so great is my misery; for my affliction is not bodily or temporal. Thou alone, therefore, who art God and eternal, canst help me. Have mercy on me, for without Thy mercy all things are terrible and bitter to me."

According to Thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

These are all words of a true repentance which magnifies and multiplies the grace of God by magnifying and multiplying sin. The apostle says (Rom. 5:20): "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." Therefore the proud have no taste for grace, because their sins do not yet taste bitter to them.

2. *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!*

Before this he began, after the manner of men, to pray for grace, for remission of sins which had been committed, and for the beginning of a new life. Now he prays almost until the end of the psalm in increasing measure that he be washed and cleansed more and more. For first grace is a beginning of washing and cleansing.¹¹ Anyone who looks upon sin as something outward only cannot remain in this grace but must slide backwards and thus remain without grace and become worse than before, although he does not see or realize it. Now with us the situation is that Adam must get out and Christ come in, Adam become as nothing, and Christ alone remain and rule. For this reason there is no end of washing and cleansing in this life. For the old Adam, with which we are born, makes sinful and nullifies also the good works, in which we make a start and some progress, if God did not look upon the grace and cleansing which has begun.

3. *For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.*

The difference between the true saints and the sham saints is this: the former see their transgressions and realize that they are not what they should be and want to be. Therefore they judge themselves and are not concerned about others. The others, however, do not perceive their own wickedness; they imagine they are as they should be. They always forget about themselves and sit in judgment on the wickedness of others. They pervert this psalm and say: "I perceive the sins of others, and the sins of

others are always before me.” This is because they have their own sins on their back and a log in their eyes (Matt. 7:3–5).

4. *Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in Thy sight.*

This is the verse from which we learn thoroughly to disregard our outward good works and to put no faith in the praise and honor of them by others. They are done in uncleanness and weakness, and are not counted good in God’s sight unless we confess them as such. Hence the interpretation which takes this verse to mean outward sins is far from right.¹² For without question we sin and do evil also by outward sins, not only before God but before men as well.

So that Thou art justified in Thy sentence and blameless in Thy judgment.

What is this? Can God not be justified unless we are sinners? Or who will judge God? It is obvious that God in Himself and in His nature is not judged or justified by anyone. He is the eternal, constant, essential, and never-changing Justice itself and the supreme Judge of all things. But in His words and works He is constantly resisted, opposed, judged, and condemned by self-righteous and self-satisfied men. There is a constant legal war between Him and them over His words and works. To say that you are justified in your words is, therefore, the same as saying that your words are justified and found and acknowledged to be true. Now here we cannot enumerate all the words that are subject to the contradiction of the proud. We shall put them all in one heap and say: All Scripture and the Word of God point to the suffering of Christ, as He Himself declares in the last chapter of Luke (24:46–47) that Scripture contains nothing else than the promised grace and forgiveness of sin through the suffering of Christ, that whoever believes in Him, and none other, shall be saved. This truth and Christ’s suffering and faith are resisted by all those who refuse to be sinners, especially those who have just begun to live.¹³ They do not want to admit that they are sinners, and they do not sigh for Christ, although God has promised in all His words that Christ should die because of sin. Therefore anyone who will not consider himself, or be considered, a sinner, tries to make God a liar and himself the truth. This is the most grievous sin and idolatry of all idolatries. Therefore the apostle John says (1 John 1:8): “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” And again (1 John 1:10): “If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His Word is not in us.” Hence the prophet says here: “In order that this terrible sin of pride may not infect me, I confess that I am a sinner before Thee and do no good, so that Thou mightest remain in truth and prevail, and also overcome all who contend with Thee, justify themselves, and judge Thee in Thy words. For in the end God will prevail and gain the victory, either here by His goodness or hereafter by His severity. It will do no good to be justified before men or in our own eyes, for we must ignore this and wait with fear to learn what God thinks about it.

5. *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*

Behold, it is so true that before Thee I am a sinner that even my nature, my very beginning, my conception, is sin, to say nothing of the words, works, thoughts, and life which follow. How could I be without sin if I was made in sin and sin is my nature and manner? I am an evil tree and by nature a child of wrath and sin. Therefore as long as this same nature and essence remains with us, we will be sinners and must say: “Forgive us our trespasses” until the body dies and is destroyed. Adam must die and decay before Christ can arise completely, and this begins with a penitent life and is completed through death. Hence death is a wholesome thing to all who believe in Christ; for it does nothing else than destroy and reduce to powder everything born of Adam, so that Christ alone may be in us.

6. *Behold, Thou desirest truth.*

That is, the outward righteousness and apparent piety is pure deception, without foundation and without truth, because it covers the sin within and is only a type of the real and true righteousness. This type is hateful to Thee, but man loves it. Therefore Thou lovest the inner truth, but they the outer falsehood; Thou the real, they the apparent. Hence they do not say: “I am a sinner before Thee.”

Thou teachest me the wisdom which is hidden away.

The wisdom of God is revealed to the proud only in its outward appearance, but it is revealed to the humble in its inner truth and hidden foundation. Now the outward appearance of this wisdom consists in this, that man believes he serves God with many words, thoughts, and works, and measures up to God’s standard. It is all an outward show, which is apparent and possible to anyone, as there are many ways and means of doing this. In all this men seek God, but entirely in reverse and outwardly. Inwardly they

know Him less than all others, because they seek themselves, and under the pretext of studying and learning about God!

The inner and hidden part of this wisdom is nothing else than knowing oneself thoroughly, and therefore hating oneself. It is seeking all righteousness not in self but in God, always dissatisfied with oneself and yearning for God, that is, humbly loving God and looking away from self. This inner, unknown righteousness is revealed in all kinds of outward behavior, manner, words, and works, in which the proud remain and harden themselves. Therefore God, who loves reality and truth, hates them, because they love the outward appearance and hypocrisy.

7. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.

Here he supports, as it were with an example, what he has said before. It is as if he were saying: “When Moses and the priest of the Law sprinkled themselves and the people with hyssop dipped in the blood of a goat (Num. 19:18 ff.) and considered themselves clean—on which the hypocrites depend, just as they do in all other outward sanctification under the Law—this was only an outward sign and type of the real thing which Thou hast in mind and which Thou considerest highly. Nor was it the inner truth which Thou hast revealed to me. Sprinkle me, therefore, with the true goat’s blood of Jesus Christ. Then I will be truly and thoroughly cleansed, without all my works and efforts.”

Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

That is, the outward washing of hands and feet according to the Law does not make me white; but with its outward appearance it misleads those who do not recognize the inner value, the true and real wisdom which it only signifies. Now as the outward sprinkling with hyssop and the washing with water in no way aids the inner washing and sprinkling but is only a figure and an empty sign, so all other outward means and gestures have no other purpose than that God should thus inwardly sprinkle, wash, work, speak, serve, etc., with the grace of the Holy Spirit. Thus the old beloved fathers looked upon the type in the Old Testament, and in it they understood the inward and hidden things of the true meaning and wisdom of God.

8. Let me hear joy and gladness.

That is, all outward righteousness, behavior, and actions cannot bring comfort to my conscience and take away sin. In spite of all efforts and good works the timid, frightened, and terrified conscience remains until Thou sprinklest and washest me with grace and thus createst in me a good conscience, so that I hear that mysterious prompting: “Your sins are forgiven” (Matt. 9:2). No one notices, sees, or understands this except him who hears it. It can be heard, and the hearing produces a calm and joyful conscience, and confidence in God.

Let the bones which Thou hast broken rejoice.

The bones which are weary and crushed, as it were, because of the sinful conscience rejoice and are revived when the conscience hears the joy of absolution. Sin is a heavy, grievous, and terrifying burden; yet it cannot be taken away through the outward works of man, but only through the inner work of God.

9. Hide Thy face from my sins.

That is: “Do not take strict notice of my works, for they are all sin if Thou shouldst set them before Thy face and judgment.” Therefore he does not say: “Turn my sin from Thy face,” as though there were some works pleasing in God’s sight, so that He would turn away only the sin and let the good remain. He must turn His face away, so that the works and we ourselves can exist and remain; that is, by grace He does not impute what in reality is sin, as we read in Ps. 32:1: “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven.”

And blot out all ray iniquities.

That is: “Whatever is lacking of righteousness, forgive, just as I have prayed Thee to turn Thy face from the evil that is still present.” For, as already said, before God all our works have what they should not have; that is, they are done in sin, in which we are born. They do not have what they should have, namely, complete purity; for of this we have been deprived by the sin of Adam.¹⁴

10. Create in me a clean heart, O God.

It is easy to give the appearance of clean hands and noble words. This is within the power of man. But a clean heart, devoid of all love of things, is the work of the Creator and His divine power. Scripture says that no one has a clean heart.¹⁵ Hence all are sinners before God, to whom the heart is as open as

hand and work are open to man. The truth which God loves is in the heart. Inner righteousness, however, is never attained completely in this life but must always be pursued.

And put a new and right spirit within me.

The spirit of the flesh and of Adam is a crooked spirit. It turns its attention toward itself and seeks its own. We are born with it. The upright spirit is the good will directed straight to God, seeking God alone. This will must be made anew and poured into the innermost part of our heart by God, so that there may be no deceit in our spirit, but that we may love the will of God from the bottom of our heart.

11. *Cast me not away from Thy presence.*

This happens to all those who do not reject themselves in their own eyes and at the same time are not concerned that they are rejected in God's sight. In fact, they set themselves up in God's presence and exalt themselves. Therefore they will be abased and cast away. For they imagine they are clean, righteous, and enlightened, and therefore cannot be rejected. The others, however, feel and know that they are justly cast away on account of their sins. Therefore they come forward with fear and humbly pray for what the self-righteous think they have already gained with their holiness.

And take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.

For of myself I am depraved. The Holy Spirit must make me holy and sustain me. Furthermore, without the Holy Spirit Himself there is no gift or grace satisfactory to God.

12. *Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation.*

For through Adam and our sin this is lost to us all and must be restored by grace. It means: "Give me again a conscience happy and secure in Thy salvation,"

And uphold me with a willing spirit.

That is, with the Holy Spirit; He makes free and willing men, who do not serve God out of painful fear or improper love. For all who serve out of fear are not firmly established as long as the fear lasts. In fact, they are forced; they serve with resentment. If there were no hell and punishment, they would not serve at all. Even those who serve God out of love of reward or some good thing are not firmly established. For if they know of no reward or if the good thing does not materialize, they stop. All these have no joy in God's salvation. Nor do they have a clean heart or a right Spirit. They are levers of themselves more than of God. Those, however, who serve God with a good and honest will are firm in their service of God, whether things go this way or that way, are sweet or sour. They are established and made firm by God with a noble, free, princely, and unconstrained will. In Hebrew the little word "free Spirit" also means "free," "willing," or "unconstrained." What is done because of force does not last, but what is done willingly remains firm.

13. *Then I will teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners will return to Thee.*

That is, I will never again teach the righteousness and ways of man, as the proud do, but the way of grace and Thy righteousness. Thus sinners will come to Thee and be truly converted. For by the righteousness of man men are turned away from God because of pride, which must be present where there is no grace.

14. *Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, Thou God of my salvation.*

Bloodguiltiness means that one has deserved death and, according to the Law, is guilty of death before God, on account of all kinds of sin (Rom. 2; Deut. 27:15 ff.). Here David refers especially to the sin committed with Bathsheba and against Uriah, because of which he deserved death.

And my tongue will sing aloud of Thy righteousness.

That is, I will never preach about man's righteousness or praise his works, but only Thy work, that nothing is greater than Thy righteousness, by which all the righteous are justified and without which all others are sinners. For if Thou dost not justify, no one will be righteous by his own works. It is called Thy righteousness because Thou grantest it out of grace, and we do not receive it by works. Therefore,

15. *O Lord, open Thou my lips.*

That is, give me strength and courage that I may preach this freely and courageously against the godless and the hypocrites.

And my mouth shall show forth Thy praise.

That is, let me be bold through Thy strength to admonish and convince all men that they are sinners and that nothing in them is worthy of honor and praise, but that they have deserved only shame and punishment, in order that they might realize that honor and praise are Thine alone because Thine alone

are righteousness and wisdom, etc. For no one can honor and praise Thee without rebuking and dishonoring himself. No one can ascribe to Thee wisdom and righteousness unless he takes it from himself and ascribes to himself only sin and folly. For no one whom God does not send and in whom He does not speak can proclaim this doctrine or sing the praises of God.

And this is the greatest thing we can do for God. This is also what He desires above all else, that we give praise and honor and every possible good to Him. Therefore he says:

16. *For Thou hast no delight in sacrifice; were I to give a burnt offering, Thou wouldst not be pleased.*

That is, Thou wilt have no one ascribe praise and honor for his righteousness and wisdom to himself, but to Thee alone. Therefore Thou carest not for sacrifice—much less for the other, lesser works; for sacrifices are the greatest. Thou desirest to be merciful and not to be a judge. Thou dost not wish to see how pious we want to be, but how pious we wish to become through Thee, so that Thou and not we may be praised and honored, that we do not give Thee anything but receive from Thee righteousness, wisdom, truth, merit, good works, etc. And therefore

17. *The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.*

It is as if he said: Everything else He despises except a heart that is humble and broken, for it ascribes honor to God and sin to itself. Such a heart gives God nothing but only takes from Him. This is also what God wants so that He may be truly God. For it behooves God to give, not to take.

18. *Do good to Zion in Thy good pleasure; build Thou the walls of Jerusalem.*

If the proud saints do not want to accept this doctrine but instead teach the others their own righteousness, do Thou show the others, the elect, Thy grace, not according to their merit but according to Thy good will. Then the walls may be built, that is, then there will be enlightened people in Christendom who preserve and teach others, to keep them from being misled by the false, self-righteous teachings and teachers. For the walls are the teachers who should be built up especially in this doctrine.

19. *Then wilt Thou delight in sacrifices of righteousness.*

This means: “They will not offer Thee goats and sheep and calves but sacrifices of righteousness, namely, themselves.” For he offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving who gives to God what he owes Him. How we owe God more than we have. Therefore we pay Him in no other way than by yielding up everything we ourselves are, and that with humble acknowledgment of our sin and confession of His righteousness and of His justice in whatever way His divine will deals with us. This attitude and resignation is the highest righteousness we can possess. It is also the proper sacrifice and is called burnt offering, as we read in the following:

In burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on Thy altar.

In German one cannot express the Hebrew words, because we have only that one little word “sacrifice,” and among us this can mean any kind of sacrifice. But in Hebrew there are many and varied names for offerings, as, for example, “sacrifice,” that is, the offering which was sacrificed in the holy office and was expressed in the Law. Others were called “holocausts.”¹⁶ In German this refers to the burnt offerings of which the priests or officiants retained nothing. Others were called death offerings and the like; these were occasional sacrifices, offered out of devotion.

Now he says that all these will be rightly offered at that time. This means: That they are offered now is of no value; for Thy pleasure is not in the sacrifice, as stated above. This is due to the fact that all outward sacrifices are in vain if the heart is not acceptable and is not itself offered first. If, however, the heart is acceptable and is offered inwardly, then all outward works are sacrifices of righteousness.

The calves he lists expressly, since they were the sacrifices he had just mentioned. And just as though they were not offered at that time, he says: “Calves *shall* then be, etc.” It is as if he said: This is now only a symbol, this present sacrifice of calves. At that time they will offer the real calves, namely, the outer man of Adam on the cross. They will make him of no account and will crucify him with Christ, whose cross is the altar of all calves.

PSALM • 102

THE FIFTH PENITENTIAL PSALM

1. *Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry come to Thee!*
2. *Do not hide Thy face from me! In the day of my distress incline Thy ear to me! Answer me speedily in the day when I call!*

3. *For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace.*
4. *My heart is smitten like grass, and withered; I forget to eat my bread.*
5. *Because of my loud groaning my bones cleave to my flesh.*
6. *I am like a vulture of the wilderness, like an owl of the waste places;*
7. *I lie awake, I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.*
8. *All the day my enemies taunt me, those who deride me use my name for a curse.*
9. *For I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink,*
10. *because of Thy indignation and anger, that Thou hast taken me up and thrown me away.*
11. *My days have passed away like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass.*
12. *Bur Thou, O Lord, dost endure forever; Thy name endures to all generations.*
13. *Thou wilt arise and have pity on Zion; it is the time to favor her; the appointed time has come.*
14. *For Thy servants hold her stones dear, and have pity on her dust.*
15. *The nations will fear the name of the Lord, and all the kings of the earth Thy glory.*
16. *For the Lord will build up Zion, He will appear in His glory;*
17. *He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and will not despise their supplication.*
18. *Let this be written for a generation to come, so that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord:*
19. *He looks down from His holy height, from heaven the Lord looks at the earth,*
20. *to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free the children of death;*
21. *that men may declare in Zion the name of the Lord, and in Jerusalem His praise,*
22. *when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to worship the Lord.*
23. *He has broken my strength in midcourse; He has shortened my days.*
24. *O my God, I say, take me not hence in the midst of my days, Thou whose years endure throughout all generations!*
25. *Of old Thou didst lay the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Thy hands.*
26. *They will perish, but Thou dost endure; they will all wear out like a garment. Thou changest them like raiment, and they pass away;*
27. *but Thou art the same, and Thy years have no end.*
28. *The children of Thy servants shall dwell secure; their posterity shall be established before Thee.*

1. *Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry come to Thee!*

THE “prayer” is his desire for grace; the “cry” is his story of misery. This now follows.

2. *Do not hide Thy face from me!*

Do not be angry with me as I have deserved. To turn away the face is a sign of wrath, while to turn the face toward one is a sign of grace.

In the day of my distress incline Thy ear to me!

Hear me at the time I am distressed and am suffering. To incline the ear is nothing else than to heed the cry of a troubled heart. Yet this same inclining also means that though he cannot call or desire strongly enough to reach up to the ears of God, he prays that God may turn downward toward him to hear him.

Answer me speedily in the day when I call!

Not only when I am pursued and suffer from the others, as the foregoing verse indicates, but in every time of need. For this psalm, like the others, first describes the inner suffering which the saints bear because of their sins in a penitent spirit, then also the persecution by others on account of this same crucified life.

3. *For my days pass away like smoke.*

That is, my days become nothing and are spent uselessly, just as smoke passes away in the air and is gone. Blessed are they who realize that this earthly life is only vain because of Adam’s sin, as we read in Ps. 78:33: “Their days vanish like a breath,” that is, like smoke; for nothing of it remains that is of any use in yonder life. And even here in time it is more a symptom and a sign than a real life, just as smoke is only a symptom and a sign of fire and not the real thing.

My bones burn like a furnace.

Just as fire drains out all fatness and dries things up, so also affliction makes all the powers of the soul dry, feeble, and weary.

4. *My heart is smitten like grass, and withered.*

Grass that is cut off or broken loses its source of life, that is, the inflowing sap and moisture; it dries out and becomes good fuel. Thus we all are smitten in Adam by the devil and robbed of our source of life, namely, of God, through whose inflowing we should become green and grow. Therefore we are without grace, dried up, fuel for the everlasting fire. Yet, on the other hand, he says of the living (Ps. 72:16): “They will blossom forth like the grass on earth.” Now the withered heart is one that has no pleasure in the eternal good, while the flesh blossoms forth to earthly things.

I forget to eat my bread.

Should I not wither away if I forget to eat? The bread of the dried-out heart is none other than God Himself, who alone can nourish the heart; for the heart must have eternal food if it is to be satisfied. But blessed is he who can realize this forgetfulness and complain about it. Accursed, however, are they who forget the forgetting, as, for example, the sensuous sinners and the proud saints who are sated, the former with outer goods, the latter with inner goods.

5. Because of my loud groaning my bones cleave to my flesh.

In my life of groaning I labor and fight against my evil nature so much that I am nothing but skin and bones, as Job says: “My bones cleave to my skin” (19:20). By this groaning, therefore, not only the bodily and momentary sobbing is to be understood, but the whole repentant life and the laborious desire for grace and comfort. Such people experience how profoundly original sin has corrupted us. However, the bones of those who do not blame themselves and do not know what is wrong with themselves do not cleave to their flesh. Such people are full of fresh blood and energy, and of a well-fed body. Thus we read in the first of these psalms (6:7): “I am weary with my moaning.”

6. I am like a vulture¹⁷ of the wilderness.

When the world and those who are wise in their own conceit persecute, despise, and revile the laboring and repentant people, the other affliction begins. A good life must also be a foolish life, because such a person turns away from all the things to which the others turn.

Like an owl of the waste places.

Because he is forsaken and despised, he likens himself to lonely birds and such as do not come out in the daytime. People do not associate with him, they do not tolerate him in the daytime, that is, in the honor and fame of the world. Hence his life is like a desert and a night.

7. I lie awake, I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.

I did not fall asleep or fail to watch over myself. The world sleeps, as the apostle says (1 Thess. 5:6): “Let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.” For the temporal lusts are opposed to the eternal good as the pictures in a dream are the opposite of the real thing. Thus Isaiah says (29:8) that sinners have the same experience as when a thirsty man dreams he is drinking, and when he awakes his soul is unsatisfied. Hence this sleep is nothing but the love and lust for creatures. But to wake is to hold fast and to look to, and long for, the eternal good. But in this he is alone, and no one is with him; for all the others are sleeping. And he says “on the housetop” as if he meant: The world is a house in which all men are enclosed and are sleeping. I alone am outside the house, on the roof, not yet in heaven and still not in the world. The world is below me, and heaven is above me. I hover between the life of the world and eternal life, lonely in the faith.

8. All the day my enemies taunt me.

Those who are opposed to God’s Word and this life and are pleased with their own life, judge and condemn me without ceasing, and they cast aside and despise my word and work.

Those who deride me.

These are the same enemies who praise me in mockery and derision, for such praise is worse than twofold mockery.

Use my name for a curse.

That is, they make of me an example, an oath, a curse and wish, as the saying goes: “May God do to you as He did to this one and that one!”

9. For I eat ashes like bread.

Not that he has actually eaten ashes, but Scripture calls the good food “bread” and the bad food “ashes.” The eating of the upright is, like ashes, trifling and really nothing in comparison with the eating of those who live sumptuously and to satisfy the flesh. This is the meaning: Compared with their food,

my food is like ashes. I am downcast and miserable, so that I have no taste for anything; and even if it were good food, it would still seem as though I were eating ashes.

And mingle tears with my drink.

That is, because of my weeping no drink has any taste for me, either. They drink and laugh, sing and are happy; for they do not hear what God says (Luke 6:21, 25): “Blessed are you that weep now” and: “Woe to you that laugh now.” For one should live in affliction and not in pleasure according to the flesh if one would live rightly.

10. Because of Thy indignation and anger.

The sight of the severe judgment and wrath of God drives away all lust of the flesh and causes eating, drinking, and lying down to be distasteful. Thus the affliction becomes burdensome. Therefore those who are so secure in their life and righteousness make fun of these penitent and humble souls, as the next of these psalms points out.¹⁸

That Thou hast taken me up and thrown me away.

So it seems to every soul who feels God’s wrath, as if it were cast away and eternally damned.

11. My days have passed away like an evening shadow.

My time has passed away vainly, and I have nothing to show for it. Just as nothing remains of a shadow, so also nothing remains of all life that is spent in fleshly and worldly lust. And yet there is no one without this life, for the flesh is in all of us. Therefore the life of all of us is a useless life. Fortunate is he who realizes this.

I wither away like grass.

As if he were saying: How short and vain, and at the same time how sinful and corrupt is the life of all men! O come, therefore, Thou who art eternal and abidest, and impart to us something of Thy life. Up to this point he has poured out his troubles and pressed himself upon God. Now he begins to express his desire and longing for the life that is in God, and he calls to Christ and His grace. Thus we read Ps. 68:1:¹⁹ “My soul thirsts for Thee.”

12. But Thou, O Lord, dost endure forever.

I pass away, and my days come to naught. Therefore I am sick of my life and desire Thy life, in which there is nothing that passes away.

Thy name endures to all generations.

That is, just as Thy essence, so also Thy name and Thy remembrance remain forever. My name, with its essence, passes away, as it is written (Ps. 9:6): “The very memory of them has perished.” Therefore, my God, how do I get from myself to Thee, that my being and my name may also remain forever? Sad to say, I am too far away from Thee and too far down in the depths.

18. Thou wilt arise and have pity on Zion.

I cannot come to Thee. Therefore, O Lord, arise, come to me, and take me to Thyself. The arising refers to the very sweet and gracious coming of God into the flesh. At that time Jerusalem was prosperous; therefore such doleful crying and begging should be understood as referring, not to temporal help but to Christ and His kingdom. He came to us that He might raise us to Himself. He had pity on Zion, namely, His people.

It is time to favor her.

The time of grace and, as St. Paul says, the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4).

The appointed time has come.

It is time for Thee Thyself to come. God does not give grace unless it is just the right time. When that is, is shown in the following:

14. For Thy servants hold her stones dear.

He speaks of Jerusalem as a city which is to be built, where stones and earth are provided in such delightful abundance that it is a joy to behold. He speaks of a spiritual structure; for Jerusalem herself was standing there in all her glory, as has been said. The meaning is this: Lord, come soon, and build; it is time. Stones and lime are at hand, and everything in such quality and abundance that Thy servants take pleasure in it and would gladly help build. That is to say: they want to hear and learn the Gospel. It is the right time for the Gospel, when people have a desire for it. Thus Christ says (John 4:34): “See how the fields are already white for harvest,” and again (Luke 10:24): “Many prophets and kings desired to see what you see.”

And have pity on her dust.

He speaks of the “dust of Jerusalem,” that is, the excavated earth, out of which cement and clay are made. Out of this Adam, too, was made (Gen. 2:7). But in an indirect way he points out that the poor and lowly desire the Gospel, as in Matt. 11:5: “The poor have the Gospel preached to them.”

15. The nations will fear the name of the Lord.

He desires a future and a kingdom of God in which not only the Jews but also all heathen are included (Ps. 2:8): “Ask of Me, etc.” It is evident what kind of Zion he means.

And all the kings of the earth Thy glory.

That is, through the Gospel they will recognize Thy power and might in Christ and honor it in fear and humility.

16. For the Lord will build up Zion.

That is, the city of God, or holy Christendom, which began at Zion, will not be built with man’s doctrine or work but only with the work and grace of God.

He will appear in His glory.

That is, He is revealed through His Word and Spirit, so that He becomes known as the one who alone is and does everything, while we are nothing. Is. 11:9: “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord.” Ps. 19:1: “The heavens are telling the glory of God.”

17. He will regard the prayer of the destitute.

It is a mark of His kingdom that it contains poor, crying, praying people who suffer much on His account. Likewise His way and rule is none other than to help, hear, and lend assistance to the poor, the afflicted, the dying, and the sinners. Is. 61:1: “I am sent to bring good tidings to the afflicted,” etc. Matt. 11:28: “Come to Me, all who labor.”

And will not despise their supplication.

It is not an earthly kingdom in which one must help, support, and assist the government, but a spiritual kingdom, in which everyone is helped out of every need of body and soul.

18. Let this be written for a generation to come.

These things will be preached, written, said, and remembered for all time. This will not cease until Judgment Day. This and nothing else shall be the subject of preaching for all children’s children.

So that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord.

As is written in Ps. 72:17:²⁰ “Under the sun His name shall reach to the descendants.” It is a strange thing about this doctrine, that if the teachers are slain the doctrine arises first of all among their descendants. Thus God is preached and praised.

19. He looks down from His holy height.

Christ’s kingdom depends on God alone. It looks to Him and recognizes Him, and He, in turn, recognizes it from heaven. This verse also expresses the fact that it is a heavenly, spiritual kingdom, and that all the poor are helped by God.

From heaven the Lord looks at the earth.

It is a hidden, spiritual kingdom; yet it is on earth among men, though hidden in faith and spirit.

20. To hear the groans of the prisoners.

It is, as stated above, the characteristic of His kingdom that God permits His own to suffer much and to be children of death and sheep for the slaughter, as St. Paul says (Rom. 8:36). But they are not forsaken on this account; they are certain that He hears their groans and their misery.

To set free the children of death.

In Hebrew those are called “children of death” who are doomed to die, just as we say “child of life,” “child of iniquity,” etc. For Christians are subject to death (Rom. 6:3).

21. That men may declare in Zion the name of the Lord.

Not the name of men, for the honor and name of God is praised in all Christendom when it is known and preached that He is the Helper of all the poor and dying Christians.

And in Jerusalem His praise.

Whoever performs the work, to him belongs the name; and whoever has the name should have the praise; and whoever has the praise, to him the honor is due.

22. When peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to worship the Lord.

This he says a second time to make it clear that His kingdom does indeed begin in Jerusalem but goes out to all kingdoms. Just as the Word and His grace to forgive sins are for Jews and heathen alike, so also the cross and the relief from it are in full sway in all places, both among the Jews and among the heathen. The kingdoms, of course, cannot actually come together in one place.

23. He has broken my strength in midcourse.

This is the way it goes in Christ's kingdom according to the outer man. He breaks, punishes, and humbles His beloved saints and permits them to be tortured here in time that they may be strong and powerful, not outwardly but inwardly. The world, however, which He raises up and strengthens in its way here in time, He will humble in the end. Therefore the prophet and the spiritual people comfort themselves with the thought that they are oppressed with Christ temporally here on earth, but not at the Last Day.

He has shortened my days.

He cuts short the life of the old man, although this verse refers especially to the holy martyrs. Thus St. Peter says (1 Peter 4:17) that the time has come for the judgment to begin with the household of God, that is, on His saints. But the end will come upon the house of Satan.

24. O my God, I say.

Although He breaks me as under and oppresses me, I will not on this account run away from Him; but I will hope in Him, cry to Him, and plead with Him all the more, as all His saints do.

Take me not hence in the midst of my days.

That is, do not let me die unprepared. Those who are tired of life and desire death, like David (1 Chron. 23:1), Abraham (Gen. 25:8), and Paul (Phil. 1:23), are removed at the end of their days; for they have said good-by to life and demand death. But those who cling to this life and love it are still in the midst of their days, as King Hezekiah says (Is. 38:10 ff.). These do not like to die, and they bear the judgment and the affliction of Christ with difficulty.

Thou whose years endure throughout all generations!

That is, consider that Thou art eternal and that I live such a short time. No one can escape Thee; but for me time could quickly run out, so that I could fail to obtain Thy grace. Thy punishment, however, cannot fail; for Thou, who art everlasting, wilt surely come.

25. Of old Thou didst lay the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Thy hands.

In His deity Christ, together with the Father, is Creator of all creatures; for the apostle quotes this verse (Heb. 1:10).

26. They will perish, but Thou dost endure; they will all wear out like a garment. Thou changest them like raiment, and they pass away.

Just as the heavens will not endure, much less the earth; hence all creatures and also the heavens will be changed. They will not pass away and perish; they will be renewed.

27. But Thou art the same.

Thou wilt not be a different God or a new God, as the Jews will say when they hear that Thou art man and God. They will charge Thy people with having a new God, different from the one who founded the earth in the beginning. But while heaven and earth may change, Thou remainest the same.

And Thy years have no end.

This the Jews and heathen have imagined; but Thy kingdom remains, and Thy people will be with Thee in eternity.

28. The children of Thy servants.

These are the people in Christendom who are baptized and taught by the apostles, for preachers are servants of God.

Shall dwell secure.

Children are heirs and continue, while servants, to whom God gives an earthly reward, do not continue in the eternal inheritance with the children (John 8:35).

Their posterity shall be established before Thee.

These are the same children, the believers in Christ. They are a spiritual posterity and heirs, yes, joint heirs with their fathers, prepared eternally before God, although rejected in time before the world. Christ's kingdom has no end.

PSALM • 130

THE SIXTH PENITENTIAL PSALM

1. *Out of the depths I cry to Thee, O Lord!*
2. *Lord, hear my voice! Let Thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!*
3. *If Thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who shall stand?*
4. *But there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared.*
5. *I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His Word I hope;*
6. *my soul waits for the Lord, from one morning watch to the next, from one morning watch to the next.*
7. *O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with Him is plenteous redemption.*
8. *And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.*

1. Out of the depths I cry to Thee, O Lord!

THESE are noble, passionate, and very profound words of a truly penitent heart that is most deeply moved in its distress. In fact, this cannot be understood except by those who have felt and experienced it. We are all in deep and great misery, but we do not all feel our condition.

I cry to Thee.

Crying is nothing but a strong and earnest longing for God's grace, which does not arise in a person unless he sees in what depth he is lying.

2. Lord, hear my voice! Let Thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

Thou dost not answer. Thou forsakest. Thou despisest my desperate cry. Yet there is no one who can help but Thee alone. Therefore let Thy ears hear and regard my cry. This is the expression of the soul when it feels that no creature will give heed to its distress, yes, that even God and all creatures seem to be striving against it. There follows, therefore:

3. If Thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities.

That is, if Thou shouldst hold my sins before Thee, look at them, and not forgive them. Yet Thou alone art a gracious and mighty Forgiver, and no one but Thee can forgive.

Lord, who shall stand?

What good would it do if all creatures were gracious to me and disregarded and forgave my sins, but God marked and retained them? And again, what does it matter if all creatures heap sins upon me and hold them against me, as long as God forgives and pays no attention to them? This is the thought of the next of these psalms (143:2): "O Lord, enter not into judgment with Thy servant; for no man living is righteous before Thee." And this verse gives the contents of this psalm: a consideration of the severe judgment of God, who cannot and will not let even one sin go unpunished. Whoever, therefore, does not consider the judgment of God, does not fear; and whoever does not fear, does not cry out; and whoever does not cry out, finds no grace.

Therefore the fear of the judgment of God must always exist in the right kind of person because of the old Adam, whom God hates and resists. Furthermore, with this fear there must be hope for grace because of the mercy which is favorable to this fear because of the new man, who is an enemy of the old and therefore agrees with the judgment of God. Thus fear and hope go hand in hand. And just as the judgment of God produces fear, so fear results in crying out, and the cry brings mercy. As long as the old man lives, the fear, that is, the crucifixion and execution of this old man, must not cease; nor dare the judgment of God be forgotten. And whoever would live without this crucifying and this fear and the judgment of God, does not live aright. Thus it is written (Ps. 10:5-6): "Thy judgments are out of his sight, and he says: I shall not be moved; I shall not meet adversity."

4. But there is forgiveness with Thee.

Therefore there is no refuge in any other person where one could stand or abide. St. Paul says (Rom. 8:31): "If God is for us, who is against us?" By the same token, who will be for us if God is against us? With Him alone is forgiveness. Therefore good works cannot help. If anyone wants to amount to something before God, he must insist on grace, not on merit.

That Thou mayest be feared.

As already stated, if anyone does not fear God, he does not implore, nor is he forgiven. In order, therefore, to gain God's grace, He and He alone is to be feared, just as He alone forgives. For if anyone fears something besides God, he seeks the favor and mercy of this other thing and does not care about

God. But whoever fears God desires His grace and does not care about anything that is not God; for he knows that no one can harm him if God is gracious to him.

5. I wait for the Lord.

Up to this point the psalmist has described the fear, the cross of the old man, and also how this is to be borne. Now he describes the hope, the life of the new man, and how one should walk in it. These two things are taught in all the psalms, indeed, in all Holy Writ. For God deals strangely with His children. He blesses them with contradictory and disharmonious things, for hope and despair are opposites. Yet His children must hope in despair; for fear is nothing else than the beginning of despair, and hope is the beginning of recovery. And these two things, direct opposites by nature, must be in us, because in us two natures are opposed to each other, the old man and the new man. The old man must fear, despair, and perish; the new man must hope, be raised up, and stand. Both of these are in one person and even in one handiwork at the same time. Just as a wood carver, by chiseling and taking away the wood that does not belong to the carving, enhances the form of his work, so hope, which forms the new man, grows in the midst of fear that cuts down the old Adam.

Therefore the psalmist says: "I wait for the Lord; that is, in this crying and cross-bearing I did not retreat or despair; nor did I trust in my own merit. I trusted in God's grace alone, which I desire, and I wait for God to help me when it pleases Him." Now there are some who want to set the goal, appoint the hour and measure, and prescribe to God how they are to be helped. And if they do not experience this, they despair; or, if possible, they seek help elsewhere. These do not tarry and wait for the Lord. God is supposed to wait for them, be ready at once, and help exactly as they themselves have designed. Those who wait for the Lord, however, ask for mercy; but they leave it to God's gracious will when, how, where, and by what means He helps them. They have no doubt about His aid, but they do not give it a name. They let God christen and name it, even if it is delayed immeasurably long. But he who designates the help, does not receive it; for he does not wait and submit to God's council, will, and delay.

My soul waits.

My soul has become a tarrying and waiting thing, as if he said: The very essence and life of my soul has been nothing but a mere tarrying and waiting for the Lord. According to the Latin, this means: "I have waited for the Lord; my soul has been waiting and expectant." My soul has become a "waiter." This expresses a firm, steady waiting, in which the soul feels only that it is tarrying and waiting, as expressed in Ps. 40:1: "Waiting, I have waited for the Lord." So here: I have waited so firmly for the Lord that my soul has become a "waiter"; and its whole life has become a tarrying, a hoping, and a waiting.

And in His Word I hope.

That is, upon His pledge and promise; for to hope and to wait without the Word of God is tempting God. Now this is the nature of the inner man, that he has within him that constant waiting, hoping, trusting, and believing in God. Therefore God does not forsake him; for He has promised mercy and help to all who trust in Him, rely on Him, and wait for Him. And this same Word and promise of God is the whole content of the new man, who lives not by bread but by that same Word of God (Matt. 4:4).

6. My soul waits for the Lord, from one morning watch to the next.

That is, my soul always has its face directed straight toward God and confidently awaits His coming and His help, no matter how it may be delayed, as in Ps. 123:2: "Our eyes look to the Lord our God, till He have mercy upon us."

This verse expresses the length of such waiting, just as the next shows the measure, namely, the Word. Scripture divides the night into four parts and calls them "watches" or "guards"; for the city watchmen guard, watch, and wait by night, to see if someone is coming or going. Each watch lasts three hours: The first, from six to nine; the second, from nine to twelve; the third, from twelve to three; and the fourth, the morning watch, from three to daylight, that is, six. We shall omit profound exegesis here.²¹ It is enough to say that one must wait for the Lord from one morning to the next, namely, constantly and steadily. And if God were to delay the whole day, we should wait until the next day.

For this reason he mentions the morning watch or time especially and not the evening or night watch: In the morning all work begins, while it ends in the evening and rests during the night. He wants to say: Once you have begun to trust in God, then do not stop. Let the evening and the night pass; just

remain watchful until morning comes again. For the new man, whose occupation is nothing but waiting for the Lord and tarrying for Him, should not give up, as the outer man does and must do. That is living in the three supreme virtues: faith, hope, and love. The type and nature of these virtues is described in the psalms as “attitudes and the works which proceed from them.”²² In this little psalm, therefore, the whole life, work, and activity of the inner man is masterfully described. It is nothing else than relying on God and letting His will stand in every respect.

7. O Israel, hope in the Lord!

This means: All spiritual and inwardly new people take the position, as already stated, that their whole life is one trusting and hoping in God and a relying on, and waiting for, Him; for Israel was the peculiar people of God, and such waiting behooved them. The name, too, is suitable; for Israel means a “wrestler with God” (Gen. 32:8). Now all who wait for the Lord so firmly that they wrestle, as it were, with God are the true Israelites.

For with the Lord there is steadfast love.

To know God aright is to recognize that with Him there is nothing but kindness and mercy. But those who feel that God is angry and unmerciful do not know Him aright. Therefore they rather flee from Him and do not wait for Him.

And with Him is plenteous redemption.

That is, with Him alone there is redemption out of the many depths mentioned above, and there is no other redemption. Although our sin is great, yet His redemption is greater, as John says (1 John 3:20): “Whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and knows all things.” Yet the proud try to find satisfaction and redemption in their own good works, attempt to work their own way out and be their own helper, redeemer, and source of mercy. They try to earn themselves truth and righteousness. But what results from these attempts?

8. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

He, He, God Himself, not we ourselves, will redeem Israel. Take note that Israel is sinful and cannot help itself. What do Moab and Ishmael undertake, those proud saints, who refuse to see that the righteousness wherewith we are made righteous is nothing but a gracious gift of the pure, unmerited grace of God? Hence we should not be merciful to ourselves, but severe and angry, so that God may be merciful to us and not angry. For whoever wants to be merciful to himself, to him God will be unmerciful; and whoever is unmerciful to himself, to him God will be merciful.

PSALM • 143

THE SEVENTH PENITENTIAL PSALM

1. *Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my supplications because of Thy faith! Answer me in Thy righteousness!*
2. *Enter not into judgment with Thy servant; for no man living is righteous before Thee.*
3. *For the enemy persecutes my soul; he has crushed my life to the ground; he has made me to sit in darkness like those long dead.*
4. *Therefore my spirit faints within me; my heart within me is appalled.*
5. *I remember the days of old, I meditate on all that Thou hast done, and speak of what Thy hands have wrought.*
6. *I stretch out my hands to Thee; my soul thirsts for Thee like a parched land. Selah.*
7. *Make haste to answer me, O Lord! My spirit fails! Hide not Thy face from me, lest I be like those who go down to the pit.*
8. *Let me hear in the morning of Thy steadfast love, for in Thee I put my trust. Teach me the way I should go, for to Thee I lift up my soul.*
9. *Deliver me, O Lord, from my enemies! I have fled to Thee for refuge!*
10. *Teach me to do Thy will, for Thou art my God! Let Thy good Spirit lead me on a level path!*
11. *For Thy name's sake, O Lord, preserve my life! In Thy righteousness bring me out of trouble!*
12. *And in Thy steadfast love cut off my enemies, and destroy all my adversaries, for I am Thy servant.*

EVERY psalm, all Scripture, calls to grace, extols grace, searches for Christ, and praises only God's work, while rejecting all the works of man. Therefore this psalm can be readily understood in the light of the foregoing, for it speaks the same language. Here one should keep in mind that this psalm has been and is spoken in the name of the whole people of Christ and of each person individually. The daily

enemies of this people are the worldly-wise and the self-righteous, who do not know and refuse to know anything about the grace of God. They even imagine that no one regards God's grace more highly than they, misled as they are into the error of their blind holiness and their good intentions.

1. Hear my prayer, O Lord.

The life of a saint is more a taking from God than a giving; more a desiring than a having; more a becoming pious than a being pious. Thus St. Augustine says that faith obtains what the Law demands.²³ Hence imploring, desiring, searching is the true essence of the inner man, as in Ps. 34:10: "Those who seek the Lord lack no good thing," and in Ps. 105:4: "Seek His presence continually." Again, Ps. 14:3 says of the proud saints: "There is none that seeks after God"—they have already found Him.

Give ear to my supplications because of Thy faith!

Not on account of the work I do, but on account of the faith Thou givest me.

Answer me in Thy righteousness.

Not on account of my righteousness, for that is sin and unrighteousness. He would say: Give me faith, and make me righteous by grace; for I see some who claim to be right and want to stand because of their own works and righteousness. Preserve me from this. They want to be something, whereas they are nothing, vain, fools, and sinners. Here it should be noted that the little words "Thy faith" and "Thy righteousness" do not refer to the faith and the righteousness with which God believes and is righteous, as some have thought, but to the grace whereby God works faith in us and makes us righteous.²⁴ Thus the apostle Paul in Rom. 1, 2, and 3 speaks of the righteousness and the faith of God given to us by the grace of Christ. A token or a painted gulden is not the real thing; it is only a representation. In fact, it is worthless and a fraud if it is given or considered as a real gulden, while a genuine gulden is such in truth and without deception. So the life, work, and righteousness of the conceited saints is, in comparison with the righteousness and work of the grace of God, only a semblance and a deadly, harmful fraud if it is held to be the real thing. This is not truth; but the real truth is that of God, who gives the genuine and fundamental righteousness, namely, faith in Christ.

2. Enter not into judgment with Thy servant.

If the servant of God, who is without doubt in the state of grace, cannot stand before the judgment throne but takes refuge in mercy, where will the enemies and sinners stay? Yes, where will the proud stay, who, in the blind arrogance of their works and good life, feel they can find merit, reward, favor, and God's righteousness? They also do not fear God's judgment on the good works, but only on the evil ones, just as though they knew what God's judgment will pronounce to be good or evil in their case.

For no man living is righteous before Thee.

It is as if he were saying: "In my eyes and in the eyes of men I can be accounted righteous, but before Thee no living person is justified." One who is dead, however, is justified, as we read in Rom. 6:7: "Who has died is freed from sin." This death begins with the life of penitence and lasts until the grave, as the psalmist says (44:23):²⁵ "For Thy sake we are slain all the day long."

3. For the enemy persecutes my soul.

That is, my enemies, who always oppose me with their wisdom and righteousness. Every Abel has his Cain; every Isaac, his Ishmael; every Jacob, his Esau; and Christ, His Judas, who wars against his soul, especially in those things which pertain to the soul, namely, faith and righteousness. The proud in heart will not stand for it that their work and righteousness is regarded as nothing. Therefore they persecute the truly pious, who live only in the faith and righteousness of God.

He has crushed my life to the ground.

This means: They command respect and sit in high places. They rise high in the eyes of men because of their outward appearance. Consequently, I must be thoroughly humiliated, rejected, and despised before men. With these words the prophet wants to express how despised a man is who lives in grace and in Christ. No one honors him; in fact, everyone dishonors him; he is considered a wholly useless, incompetent, undesirable person in everything that concerns man. And whoever has not experienced this, does not have such enemies, and does not consider all his good works, words, counsel, and thoughts foolishness, evils and faults—he has not yet rightly come to Christ, unless he has become his own enemy and attributes to himself what others should attribute to him, and considers himself unfit and incompetent for all good words, works, and life, and really acknowledges this without deceit in his heart.

He has made me to sit in darkness like those long dead.

They dwell in the light, are well known and respected, illustrious and acceptable; but they lay me low in disgrace and disfavor. I am like a dead person who no longer appears before the world, as the psalmist has said above (102:6): “I am like a nocturnal raven,²⁶ like a lonely bird in the wilderness.” So it goes. The upright are expendable in every estate and office, and are ignored besides. No one wants to meet them or know them, but those with the appearance of holiness are stared at by everyone.

4. Therefore my spirit faints within me; my heart within me is appalled.

This is the right kind of sacrifice, one that pleases God, as already stated in the fourth of these psalms (51:17), namely, a soul that has no comfort among creatures and is even forsaken and persecuted by itself, so that it looks for nothing but the pure grace of God. Those who weep are blessed, for they shall be comforted (Matt. 5:4).

5. I remember the days of old.

Those who are illustrious and exalted and dwell in the light of men do not want to be troubled and sad. They have comfort and joy in the present life and in the works of their own strength, wisdom, and righteousness; they do not need God. But I, who am so poor in these things, know of no other comfort than this, that God in times past has permitted all His saints to experience need and has never sustained anyone through his own works, abilities, knowledge, or piety. Thus Ps. 44:1–3: “O God, we have heard, our fathers have told us, what deeds Thou didst perform in their days, how Thou didst drive out and afflict the heathen, that Thou mightest plant them in their land. For indeed, not with their swords did they possess the land, nor did their own power help them, but Thy power and the gracious light of Thy countenance; for it pleased Thee to do this even though they did not deserve it.”

I remember the days of old, I meditate on all that Thou hast done.

That is, I have taken no notice of man’s works and words, no matter how brilliant and dear they are to the world; for I know that they can save no one and are of no use except to contribute toward false and vain glory. All comfort, help, and blessedness are due to Thy work alone. Only when Thou doest our works, and our works are not ours but Thine, then they are pleasing, right, true, and good before Thee. Those, however, who perform and honor the works of their own light, strength, and wisdom do not recognize the works of Thy grace. When he says “in all Thy works,” he means that, although God’s works are innumerable, the works with which he is concerned should be ascribed to God. He does not want to praise any work of man; for no work of man, but only God’s work, amounts to something. In these words, therefore, he contrasts the ways of grace with those of nature. Furthermore, in Scripture the little word *meditabor*,²⁷ which is translated here with “meditate on,” often means to “preach” or “speak,” as in Ps. 37:30: “The mouth of the righteous will meditate on wisdom,” that is, will preach wisely and with thoughtfulness about it. From this speaking of the works and grace of God springs this whole feud and persecution about which he complains above, namely, that the proud in heart depend, not on God’s grace and work but on the help, counsel, and power of their own works; those are their thoughts.

And speak of what Thy hands have wrought.

That is, I have told and reminded them of the works of Thy hands, to keep them from esteeming their own works so highly. But this has angered them; therefore they have become my enemies. The “works of the hands of God” are the pious, whom He gives birth to and creates out of grace. This happens without any co-operation on their part, for this is how they become new creatures in Christ. Now the works are the deeds and the suffering which God works through those so created and in which they co-operate. Ps. 28:5 says of this: “They do not regard the works of the Lord or the work of His hands.” Again, Ps. 19:1: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims His handiwork”; that is, the apostles²⁸ preach only about the righteousness which God works in us, not at all about the righteousness which men can produce.

6. I stretch out my hands to Thee.

That is, since everything depends on Thy work and grace, I justly seek only grace and never feel secure in my own efforts, as my enemies do. They do not stretch out their hands to Thee; rather, they stick them into their own bosom and desire nothing from Thee but take pleasure in themselves. “To stretch out the hand to God” implies prayer to God, but in this spiritual sense, that all our works should be ascribed to God.

My soul thirsts for Thee like a parched land. Selah.

Just as a parched field thirsts for rain, so my soul thirsts for Thy grace, as in Ps. 63:1: “My soul thirsts for Thee.” This flows from the knowledge that all work without God’s grace is nothing. The proud in heart do not believe this. Therefore their thoughts, words, and doctrine rest on their own works. They are sated and do not thirst for grace, nor do they stretch forth their hands to God. They consider their life entirely satisfactory.

7. Make haste to answer me, O Lord! My spirit fails!

As said before, the disconsolate soul which finds nothing in itself is God’s most cherished sacrifice, especially when it cries for His grace. God hears nothing more gladly than crying and thirsting for His mercy. But such a thirst cannot be present in a man who finds much of the good life in himself and does not fear the judgment of God. Now he says: “I have thirsted and longed for grace so long that I cannot go on. I am tired of waiting. It is time; now hurry, and hear me quickly!” It is said for our edification that we should wait patiently for God’s grace and not despair, even though He may delay.

Hide not Thy face from me, lest I be like those who go down to the pit.

God’s delay in granting grace and help causes the soul to fear that it is forsaken and condemned. But it is put on the rack to make it desire greater and more profound grace and thus receive more perfect grace. Now he is a truly Christ-formed man who is inwardly disconsolate and of a contrite spirit and has a constant longing for God’s grace and help. Yet when he tries to tell others of this cross and wants to teach them, he not only fails to find sympathy and a following but is repaid with ungratefulness and hatred. Thus he is inwardly and outwardly crucified with Christ. For the proud in heart stand boldly in their presumption that they are like those who are going to heaven. They do not have any fear of hell and thirst for grace.

8. Let me hear in the morning of Thy steadfast love.

That is, as stated in the fourth of these psalms (51:8): “Let me hear joy and gladness!” Let me hear Thy grace, which says to my heart (Matt. 9:2): “Your sins are forgiven.” Thus God speaks peace to the hearts of His people, and He does this “early,” that is, speedily. Delay not, He says, for I am tired and can wait no longer.

For in Thee I put my trust.

Let this move Thee, that I seek no other comfort than Thee alone. It is indeed something great not to look to man or creatures for help in time of trouble but to subject oneself and endure, humbly to wait for help, and to hope in God. Of such there are few on earth.

Teach me the way I should go.

In the second of these psalms it was said (32:8): “I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go,” for it is impossible for man to find his own way in his life. The reason: He must become blind and must give himself to God in true faith. Faith, however, sees nothing, and the way is dark. Of this Ps. 18:9 says: “Thick darkness was under his feet.” Hence those who follow the light of reason and go no farther than they consider right, godly, and good are horses and asses. What seems different to them—such as things of faith—from this they flee.

For to Thee I lift up my soul.

That is, I am already surrendered and given over to Thy will. God can teach and lead those who turn their souls over to Him and permit themselves to be led. He cannot lead those who draw their souls within themselves and hide them. Hence it should be understood that the words “lift up the soul to God” mean “to offer up the soul,” for the sacrifices in the Law were lifted up toward God. So the meaning is this: “I offer up to Thee not silver and gold, not calves or sheep, but my heart and soul, which in Thy judgment are the only real sacrifices.” Thus Prov. 23:26: “Son, give me your heart.” The heart, the very core—that is what God wants.

This verse is a great and most useful prayer, that a man can say to his God: “Behold, take my heart, and lead me according to Thy will. I surrender myself wholly to Thee.”

9. Deliver me, O Lord, from my enemies!

The enemies are the wise and holy ones. May they not overwhelm me and draw me from Thee to themselves, as in Ps. 19:13: “If the strangers do not have dominion over me, I shall be blameless.” For, as already said, the enemies of the righteous are trying only to mislead them and clutch them to themselves, into their way of life, which seems to them to be the only right one. Therefore God’s protection and help are necessary, that they may stand firm in persecution. Thus the Jews treated the

apostles, for with all their attacks they had no other aim in mind than to establish their ways and customs according to the Law and to draw the Christians to themselves by force.

I have fled to Thee for refuge!

10. Teach me to do Thy will!

My enemies need neither Thee nor Thy doctrine. Hence they do not flee to Thee. In fact, they teach and tell me what I should do; they want to be schoolmasters of all, while it is all a wicked deception. Therefore preserve me and deliver me from them, and be Thou my master. Thus Ps. 120:2 says: "Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips," that is, from false doctrine and cunning tongues which teach error under the guise of truth. Today, too, there are countless such preachers in Christendom, and only a few who preach the real truth.

For Thou art my God.

That is, I do not make an idol of my wisdom and righteousness, as my enemies do; but I cling to Thy grace and receive from Thee wisdom and righteousness, which are found in Thee and abide forever.

Let Thy good Spirit lead me on a level path.

Do not permit them or any man to lead me, for they lead me on a crooked path. And Thy spirit, the evil one, leads them. Here it must be noted that both spirits are God's, the good and the evil. The evil one God gives to the proud in heart, as it is written of Saul (1 Sam. 16:14) that the evil spirit from the Lord ruled him, namely, the angry, raging spirit, with which they fight for their right and truth, and pursue those who are good, as we read in Rom. 11:8: "God has given them a prickly spirit." The good Spirit is the Holy Spirit. He creates gentle, kind, and good hearts, which walk the right path, on which they seek God in all things and not themselves.

11. For Thy names sake, O Lord, preserve my life!

That is, that Thy name may be honored. God's name is honored when men declare that He gives life and righteousness by grace without merit. Then one can say: God is kind, gracious, merciful. These are His names that are to be praised. But the self-righteous honor their own names. They want to have life through their own righteousness. Therefore they despise the righteousness of God, which He grants the sinner by grace and by which He makes him alive in His freely given righteousness and in His truth.

In Thy righteousness bring me out of trouble!

He not only prays to be preserved in the face of his enemies, those who consider themselves great in their righteousness, but also to be led out from among them at last. For although the righteous are preserved among their enemies, yet they are like captives among them until they are brought out from them, or the enemies are converted. This God would do because of His righteousness, not that He seeks His own honor in this deliverance but that men may learn how God establishes the righteousness of faith in opposition to works.

12. And in Thy steadfast love cut off my enemies.

That is, on account of Thy mercy and grace, so that it may be praised and acknowledged. My enemies are always opposed to this praise and acknowledgment, for they praise their own righteousness and make much of their own wisdom.

Destroy all my adversaries.

These are the same self-conceited people who seek to trap the souls of the righteous in their snare and error, as is written in Ps. 124:7: "The snare is broken, and we have escaped!"

For I am Thy servant.

I live in grace. Therefore my whole life serves Thee, not myself; for I seek not myself but Thee and Thine. Those who live in their own righteousness cannot do this. They serve themselves and look for their own welfare in all things.

Now someone might say to me: "Can't you ever do anything but speak only about the righteousness, wisdom, and strength of God rather than of man, always expounding Scripture from the standpoint of God's righteousness and grace, always harping on the same string and singing the same old song?" To this I answer:

Let each one look to himself. As for me, I confess: Whenever I found less in the Scriptures than Christ, I was never satisfied; but whenever I found more than Christ, I never became poorer. Therefore it seems to me to be true that God the Holy Spirit does not know and does not want to know anything

besides Jesus Christ, as He says of Him (John 16:13–14): “He will glorify Me; He will not speak of Himself, but He will take of Mine and declare it to you.”

Christ is God’s grace, mercy, righteousness, truth, wisdom, power, comfort, and salvation, given to us by God without any merit on our part. Christ, I say, not as some express it in blind words, “causally,”²⁹ that He grants righteousness and remains absent Himself, for that would be dead. Yes, it is not given at all unless Christ Himself is present, just as the radiance of the sun and the heat of fire are not present if there is no sun and no fire.

Now there are some who think lightly of these words of grace and arrogantly say: “Who does not know that without grace there is no good in us?” They insist they know all this very well. In fact, if you ask them whether they think little of their own righteousness, they are quick to say: “Of course, I am certain of that!”

It is indeed grave and wretched blindness that they consider themselves to have attained the highest degree of perfection when they have not even understood or tasted the lowest grade. For who can be prouder than the person who has the presumption to claim that he is free of all pride and evil inclination? Spiritual pride is the last and deepest vice, since they are not yet free from carnal and human inclinations.

No saint has ever been so bold as to claim that his righteousness and wisdom meant nothing to him. They are steeped in strife and are always at war among themselves about these things.

Now these come with the deceptive argument: “Yes, but the inclination is not a mortal sin.”³⁰ They insist that they are not blind but know very well which are daily sins and which are deadly sins, and in this blindness they practically sit in the judgment seat of Christ. It is true that daily sins do not damn.

But they are not “daily” sins by their nature; it is only because by grace God looks upon them as “daily.” However, He does this only in the case of those who do not underrate them.

For this reason it is dangerous to speak about “daily” sins if one does so to gain a feeling of security and false comfort. This leads to striving against the fear of God and to secret contempt for the judgment of God. For if man must give account on the Last Day of every idle word (Matt. 12:36), who will be so bold as not to shun daily sins with fear, to weep over them, and then with humble awe to long earnestly for grace and mercy?

THE FOUR PSALMS OF COMFORT

Dedicated to Queen Mary of Hungary

Translated by
JAROSLAV PELIKAN

PREFACE

To Her Noble Majesty, the Lady Mary, born Queen of Spain, etc., Queen of Hungary and Bohemia, etc., My Most Gracious Lady.

GRACE and comfort from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. At the suggestion of some pious people, Most Gracious Queen, I had intended to dedicate these four psalms to you to urge that Your Royal Majesty cheerfully and joyfully persevere in your encouragement of the holy Word of God in Hungary. For I had received the good news that Your Royal Majesty was inclined toward the Gospel, but that you were being severely restrained and held back by the wicked bishops, who are said to be powerful in Hungary and to be in the majority. In fact, they have even ordered the shedding of innocent blood and have raged furiously against the truth of God. But meanwhile, unfortunately, the situation has been changed, by the power and providence of God. The Turk has brought on this misery and sorrow, and the noble young King Louis, Your Majesty’s dear husband, has been struck down.¹ Therefore my intention also had to be revised. If the bishops had permitted the Gospel to run its course, the whole

world would now be filled with the cry that this misfortune has come upon Hungary on account of the Lutheran heresy. What slanders there would have been! Now they have to look for somebody else to blame. God has, it seems to me, seen to it that there are no grounds for such slanders.

Nevertheless, as St. Paul writes to the Romans (15:4), Holy Scripture is a book of comfort and teaches us patience. Therefore I have gone ahead with the publication of these same psalms to comfort Your Royal Majesty, insofar as God grants us comfort, in the midst of this great and sudden misfortune and sorrow with which Almighty God has afflicted Your Royal Majesty at this time. He has not done this because He is wrathful or displeased, as we might easily suppose, but because He wants to discipline you and to test you. Through this experience Your Royal Majesty should learn to trust solely in the true Father who is in heaven, to find your comfort in the true Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, who is also our Brother, indeed our flesh and blood, and to take delight in your real friends and true companions, the holy angels, who surround us and take care of us. For although it is understandably a bitter and difficult lot for Your Royal Majesty to be a widow so early in life and to be deprived of your husband, nevertheless the Scriptures, and especially the psalms, will give Your Royal Majesty a great deal of good comfort against this and show you in detail the sweet and kind Father and Son, in whom certain and eternal life lies hidden (Col. 3:3). And certainly anyone who has come to the point that he can see and feel in the Scriptures the Father's love toward us will easily be able to bear all the misfortune that there may be on earth. On the other hand, anyone who does not feel it cannot be genuinely happy, even though he is bathed in pleasure and joy throughout the world. No misfortune that can ever befall a human being is as great as the misfortune that befell God the Father Himself: after all His miracles and deeds of kindness people finally spat upon His dearest Son, cursed Him, and put Him to a most shameful death on the cross. Of course, everyone thinks that his own misfortune is the greatest, and he is more concerned about it than about the cross of Christ, even if He had suffered ten crosses! This is because we are not as strong in patience as God is; this is why smaller crosses trouble us more than the cross of Christ. But may the Father of mercy and the God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3) console Your Royal Majesty in His Son Jesus Christ through His Holy Spirit, so that you may soon be able to forget this sorrow or at least bear it courageously. Amen. Wittenberg, November 1, 1526.²

Your Royal Majesty's obedient servant,

MARTIN LUTHER

PSALM • 37

To comfort those who are impatient because the wicked do evil and yet remain unpunished and very fortunate for so long.

1. Fret not yourself because of the wicked, be not envious of wrongdoers.

How directly the prophet grasps and strikes the thoughts of the heart in this temptation! He lists all the reasons for it and says first: "O man, you are angry, and it seems to you that you have good reason to be angry. For there are wicked men, and they are doing wrong and much harm. Yet they are prospering so well that human nature thinks it has just cause to be angry. But not so, dear child. Let grace, not nature, rule here. Curb your anger, and calm yourself for a little while. Let them do their evil; let them prosper! Listen to me; it will not harm you." Then man says: "Yes, but when will it stop? Who can stand it for long?" He replies:

2. For they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb.

This is a fine illustration; it is frightening to the hypocrites and comforting to the suffering. How wonderfully he takes us out of our own sight and puts us before the sight of God! Before our own sight the mob of hypocrites grows green, blooms, and increases until it covers the whole world; only they seem to amount to anything, as the green grass covers and adorns the earth.

But in God's sight, what are they? Hay that is soon to be harvested. The higher the grass grows, the closer are the scythes and pitchforks. Thus the faster the wicked grow and the higher they soar, the closer is their downfall. Then why should you be angry, since their wickedness and their good fortune are such a brief thing? But you may say: "What am I to do meanwhile? What shall I hold on to until that happens?" Listen to the great promise:

3. Trust in the Lord, and do good; remain in the land, and make your living in faith.

Now he brushes aside all impatient thoughts and puts the heart at rest. It is as if he were saying: "Dear child, don't be impatient. Do not curse them or wish them anything evil. These are human and

wicked thoughts. Put your hope in God; wait to see what He will make of this; go your own way. Do not on anyone's account give up doing good, as you have begun to do, wherever and to whomever you have the opportunity to do it. Do not return evil for evil, but good for evil.

"You might get the idea that you want to run away and move to some other place, in order to be rid of them and get away from them. Not so! Remain in the land; go on dwelling where you are. Do not on their account transfer your home or change your country. Rather you should make your living in faith and go on doing your job as you did before. If they frustrate or harm you and provoke you to run away, never mind. Keep your faith, and do not doubt. God will not forsake you. Just do your part, go on working and making a living, and let Him prevail. You should not stop supporting yourself if they frustrate you at one point or another; for you hope that God will make up for this somewhere else, as He did for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who also faced this temptation."

4. Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.

That is, do not permit yourself to be vexed that God lets them prosper so; indeed, take pleasure in it as the very gracious will of God. Content yourself with His will. Then your dissatisfaction at the prosperity of the wicked will pass away. Look, here you have this comforting promise: "He will give you all that your heart desires." What more do you want? Only be sure that instead of this vexation you find joy and satisfaction in the will of God. Then your enemies will not only do you no harm, but your heart will also be full of peace and will joyfully await the fulfillment of this promise of God.

5. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in Him, and He will act.

This does not mean that you should loaf. But commit your ways, your work, your word, and your walking to God, and do not be bothered by them. Committing our way to God does not mean that we do nothing. It means that though the hypocrites may denounce, ridicule, slander, or frustrate what we do, we must not give in to them or quit, but keep right on with it, letting them have their stubbornness and entrusting the whole cause to God, who will make it come out right on both sides.

6. He will bring forth your vindication as the light, and your right as the noonday.

This is the greatest worry of those who are weak in faith: they are vexed that the wickedness of evil men should put on such a fine appearance and have such a good reputation. They are afraid that their own cause will be beaten down and obscured, because they see how high and handsome the raging of their opponents is. Therefore he brings this comfort and says: "Dear child, it does not matter that they beat you and your cause down with clouds and rain, minimize your reputation in the sight of the world, and bury you in darkness, while their cause is soaring and shining like the sun. If you commit your business to God, hope and wait for Him, then you may be sure that your right and vindication will not remain in the darkness. It will have to come forth and become as evident to everyone as the brightness of noonday. All those who have beaten you down and obscured you will come to naught. All you have to do is to wait, so that by your raging, discontent, and vexation you do not hinder God in this undertaking." Therefore he continues his admonition:

7. Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for Him; fret not yourself over him who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices.

It is as if he were saying: "It will tend to vex you when you encounter misfortune in a righteous cause, while they get along very well in their wickedness and do not disappear, as you wish they would. You see the wicked man succeed so well in all his evil devices that a proverb has been coined about it: 'The greater the scoundrel, the greater his success.' But be wise, dear child, and do not let that get you down. Cling to God, and your heart's desire will come—in abundance! But it is not yet time; the scoundrel's success must pass by and have its appointed time before it is all over. Meanwhile you must commit it to God, take your pleasure in Him, and find satisfaction in His will, so that you do not hinder His will in you or in your enemy. For that is what happens when people will not stop raging; either they ram their cause through headfirst,³ or they smash it to bits."

He uses a fine Hebrew word here: "Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for Him."⁴ Just as an embryo in the mother's womb lets God form it, so in this case you have been conceived in God, and He will form you in the correct shape if you will only be still.

8. Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.

See how diligently he warns us not to repay evil with evil or to follow the example of the wicked because of their success, as our nature continually urges us to do. What does such anger accomplish? It

does not make things better; it only mires you down even deeper. And even if everything went as well as possible and you came out on top and were the winner, what would you have won? You would have hindered God, lost His grace and favor, and become like the wicked evildoers, whose fate you would share. Thus he says next:

9. *For the wicked shall be cut off; but those who wait for the Lord shall possess the land.*

It does not matter that you did not start it or that you had provocation, for the judgment is simple and direct: Whoever does evil, with or without provocation, will be cut off. This is also evident throughout the world and throughout history. But he who waits for God will endure even when the evildoer next to him perishes, if only he can wait long enough! The wicked men are so ripe that there is simply no stopping them now. They are fastening a stubborn misfortune around their necks, and it will ruin them. For the ripe grass must become hay, even if it dries up of itself on the stem. A wicked man is more intolerable and dangerous to himself than he is to anyone else, as we can see from the examples of murderers, thieves, tyrants, and the like.

10. *Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look well at his place, he will not be there.*

This explains what was said earlier (v. 2), that they are like the grass which is quickly cut down, and it is intended to quiet our impatience, which is afraid that the wicked are living too long.

But you may say: “Yes, but I can see that the unrighteous ordinarily live long and are even buried with honor!” Answer: That surely happens because the other side has not guided itself by this psalm but has frustrated and ruined the cause by its anger, rage, threats, complaints, and cries. Because no one there committed his cause to God and waited for His will, the judgment of the preceding verse has come upon both sides, and those who have done evil have been destroyed all together. But if one side had been converted to God, then the other side would certainly and swiftly have perished alone, as this verse says. That is why we do not see a demonstration of this verse in the world today. For everyone impatiently ignores God and takes it upon himself to defend himself by right or might. Thus God is frustrated in the work for which this psalm praises Him.

11. *But the meek shall possess the land, and delight themselves in great peace.*

This also substantiates what was said earlier (v. 9), that the righteous shall endure after the destruction of the evildoers. It does not mean that they will remain on earth forever, but that even here on earth their cause will achieve success and peace, a peace which they have earned by their suffering, their patience, and their inner peace.

12. *The wicked plots against the righteous, and gnashes his teeth at him.*

This is said for the consolation of those who are weak in faith, who do not want to endure the attacks of the wicked and are vexed that God does not punish them right away but lets them get along so well. I have translated *impius* with “wicked”;⁵ for it actually means one who does not trust in God or believe in Him, who still lives on the basis of nature, by his own resources and his free will. This is especially true of the hypocrites, those who seem to be learned or saintly. Such are in our day the pope, the bishops, the priests, the monks, the theologians, and other such people, whose nature compels them to rage against the holy Gospel, as we see them doing continually. But how does their raging and raving help them? Listen to what follows:

13. *But the Lord laughs at the wicked, for He sees that his day is coming.*

How could we receive a greater comfort? The raging enemies of the righteous use all their power and wickedness and are bent on devouring the righteous (that is, the believer in God). And God has such contempt for them that He laughs at them, for He sees how brief their rage will be and how soon their day will come. This does not mean that God laughs as a man laughs, but that it is truly ridiculous to behold how, despite their rage and their ambitious plans, these madmen do not make one whit of progress. They are like the silly fool who would take a long spear and a short dagger and try to bring the sun down from the sky, and then would dance for joy, as though he had really accomplished something.

14. *The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows, to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those who walk uprightly.*

Here “sword” and “bow” mean the poisonous and evil tongues with which they slander, ridicule, distort, denounce, and defame the cause of the righteous, in order to kill the righteous and exterminate them through hate and persecution. Thus Ps. 57:4 says: “The teeth of the sons of men are spears and

arrows, their tongues sharp swords.” With them they swing at the righteous to fell him and murder him, that is, not only to kill him but to have their wicked way with him and to besmirch him.

He calls the righteous “the poor and needy” because they are despised and worthless before the great and mighty strutting and bragging of the wicked. But what do the wicked accomplish? Listen:

15. *But their sword shall enter their own heart, and their bows shall be broken.*

That is, they will have to eat their wicked words and choke on them eternally, so that their conscience will be pierced by them in death and will be tortured eternally. In addition, their bow will be broken. It is all useless, and all they accomplish with their raging is that they bring eternal misfortune upon themselves. These poor miserable people! Therefore no one should become excited over their hate and abuse. This is necessary that they might prepare their own bath in hell, even though human nature finds such words of abuse difficult to bear. But the person who is guided by this psalm joins God in laughing at them, and he sees their forthcoming end.

16. *Better is a little that the righteous has than the abundance of many wicked.*

Human nature is also irked because the wicked are wealthy, numerous, and mighty, while the righteous man is poor and lonely. He has very little to begin with, and they take even this away from him and keep him from making a living. Therefore the Holy Spirit comforts His dear child and says: “Do not let it irk you that you have so little and they have so much. Let them be rich and sated here. It is better for you to have a little with the favor of God than to have a big pile of goods not only from one wicked man but from all of them, with God’s disfavor, as they do. Listen, too, to the judgment on your poverty and their riches”:

17. *For the arms of the wicked shall be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous.*

The “arm” or hand are the entourage of the wicked. They are so great, mighty, and powerful because there are so many of them sticking together. Thus the arm of the pope today are the kings, princes, bishops, scholars, priests, and monks, on whom he relies but about whom God does not care. Every wicked man has the crowd of the mighty on his side; for riches and might have never, or at least very seldom, stood on the side of the righteous.

But what does it matter? Only trust in God, for it must all be broken. You should not become excited about it or let it irk you. God is holding you up; you will not sink. His arm and His hand are over you and have a firm grip on you.

18. *The Lord knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will abide forever.*

God recognizes their days, their appointed time;⁶ that is, because they trust Him fully and do not want to know when and how their help is to come, God takes their side. And though it seems to the wicked that God has forgotten the blameless, this is not true; God knows well when it is the appropriate time to help them. As Ps. 9:9 says: “God is a Helper at the appropriate time,” and Ps. 31:15: “My times are in Thy hand.” It is as if he were saying: “They are poor and few in number, while the others are rich and numerous. But never mind; they will still have enough and will not suffer want. God knows well when it is the appropriate time to help and counsel them, and they trust in Him without relying on their own help and counsel.”

In addition, their heritage will be eternal, not only in the world to come but also in this world. For they will and must always have enough, even though they may not have extra grain, as the wicked do. God is their grain and their granary, their wine cellar and their entire property. Hence there follows:

19. *They are not put to shame in evil times, in the days of famine they have abundance.*

When war or hard times come, it will be disastrous for all those who put their reliance on their granary or wine cellar or property; for this is quickly dissipated and used up. Thus trouble and disaster come upon those who used to be so brave and proud. But because God is their comfort and their grain, the righteous will not suffer want. Before this would happen, all the angels would have to come down from heaven to feed them. For the Grain in which they trust will not let them suffer want, temporally or eternally. How about the wicked? Listen:

20. *But the wicked and the enemies of the Lord will perish; even though they are like a precious meadow, they will vanish like smoke.*

Such striking language and such a contemptuous judgment on these great, mighty, and rich nobles! He says: What if they were the richest and most precious meadow, where plenty of everything would be growing! That is indeed what they are, for they have plenty; they are the golden, rich meadow in the

world. Nevertheless, they must perish, yes, disappear and vanish like smoke. Where are those who used to be, who used to have great possessions? None of them remain in our memory, while the righteous remain in memory and in honor. Therefore, dear child, let them be as rich as they please. If you consider the outcome, you will find that their whole cause is smoke, because they are the enemies of God and hate and persecute those who are His. You should also be comforted because he calls them the enemies of God, although until now they have been called only your enemies. Thus you should know that God is taking your part by making your enemies His enemies as well.

21. *The wicked borrows, and cannot pay back; but the righteous is generous and gives.*

This is a comforting difference among possessions. Not only are the possessions of the wicked perishable and transitory, but they are evil and damnable possessions, because they have only been heaped up and have not been distributed to those in need. This violates the nature of possessions.

The possessions of the righteous, on the other hand, not only have no end—because he trusts in God and waits for his possessions from Him—but they are truly useful possessions which are distributed to others and are not just heaped up. Thus he has enough, even without temporal grain, and gives enough to others too. This is a genuine possession. Even though you may not have much, it is God-pleasing and useful. The wicked have a great deal, but it is unchristian and useless.

When he says: “The wicked borrows,” this is not to be taken to mean that the rich take possessions away from people; it is used as a parable or proverb. The person who borrows much and does not pay back is heading for the time when he will be dispossessed. So the rich and wicked receive much from God and borrow from Him, but they do not pay Him back by distributing to those in need (which is why they received the possessions in the first place); therefore their possessions will come to an evil end and vanish like smoke. This interpretation is substantiated by his comparison of the wicked with the righteous: one gives, and the other does not, even though they both receive from God. Therefore the receiving of the wicked is compared to borrowing and not paying back, while the possessions of the righteous man are not a loan or a debt but a free gift from God, put to a good use for himself and for his neighbor.

22. *For those blessed by the Lord shall possess the land, but those cursed by Him shall be cut off.*

You see, he calls the wicked “cursed by God” and the believers “blessed by God,” lest their great possessions and your poverty depress you and act as an obstacle to your faith. What more do you want? Isn’t this comfort enough to make you patient? Even if you do not have a surplus, as they do, you will still have enough, and you will possess the land. This does not mean that you are lord of the world, but you will be well enough off on earth and dwell at peace in the land. For God blesses you temporally and eternally because you trust Him, even though you are cursed and insulted by the wicked. On the other hand, the wicked and rich may have a surplus for a while; but they will come to ruin and will not remain on their land and possessions. They will surely be evicted, and someone else will be installed there, because God is cursing them and withdrawing His grace from them temporally and eternally. For they do not believe in Him, even though they have blessings and endowments from men.

Wherever the righteous are, therefore, they have enough on earth and remain in their possessions. On the other hand, the wicked are uprooted, wherever they may be in their possessions. This is demonstrated by all the principalities, empires, and great estates which we see passing back and forth from one line to another.

Thus, you see, you have the judgment which is soon carried out regarding temporal possessions: the righteous man must have plenty, and the unrighteous must come to ruin, because the righteous man trusts God and uses his possessions well; but the unrighteous man does not trust Him and does not use his possessions well. Thus we read that Abraham and Lot were rich and that they gladly extended their hospitality to pilgrims (Gen. 18–19). Therefore although they had no land and grain of their own, they remained in the land and had plenty.

23. *The steps of a man are from the Lord, and He establishes him in whose way He delights.*

Still more comfort! Not only are you to have plenty of temporal possessions; but everything you do, your whole life and conduct, will succeed and prosper, because you trust God, surrender yourself! and your cause to Him, and remain yielded to Him throughout your life. Thus you cause Him to find pleasure, delight, and satisfaction in advancing your works and ways. But this is opposed by the fact that a God-pleasing way of life receives no support but only hindrance and rejection from the wicked. This is

a vexation for human nature. Therefore one must find consolation in God's approval and support of our way of life, regardless of the hindrance and rejection of the wicked.

24. Though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong; for the Lord is the stay of his hand.

Here "falling" could be taken to mean that the righteous man sins occasionally but then stands up again, as Solomon says (Prov. 24:16). We shall not follow this interpretation, however, but hold on to the idea that here "falling" means that the righteous man is sometimes defeated and the wicked triumph. So it was with David, who was pursued by Saul and by Absalom, and with Christ, who was crucified. Such "falling" does not last long. God does not let the righteous man lie in rejection but takes hold of his hand, lifts him up, and causes him to remain standing.

With this the Spirit consoles and answers anyone who would think to himself privately: "Yes, but I have observed that the righteous man had to go down to defeat and that his cause fell into the ashes before the wicked." "Yes," He says, "dear child, but do not let this bother you. He may fall, but he will not stay rejected. He must rise again, even though the whole world should doubt it. For God seizes him by the hand and lifts him up again."

25. I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging bread.

You see, he provides further assurance by citing his own experience. And truly, daily experience does substantiate this, and all men must acknowledge that it is so. If someone is so desolate that he must hunt for his bread, this is a sure sign that he has lacked faith and, therefore, deserves to be desolate.

But this hunting for bread or begging bread must be understood to mean that the righteous man does not suffer hunger or die of starvation, even though he may be poor and have little to his name. Though he may not know where his next meal is coming from, he still manages to eat. If one person does not provide him with food, another does; he must surely get his food somewhere, and those who do not contribute to his support are sinning. Although the rich man did not give anything to poor Lazarus (Luke 16:21), Lazarus still had food, however meager it may have been. God does not spare His saints poverty, but He does not let them be defeated or destroyed by it.

26. He is ever giving liberally and lending, and his children become a blessing.

Now he is speaking about the righteous man who has possessions and children. He says that even though such a man gives and lends liberally every day, he and his children will still have plenty. God's blessing consists in this, that they will have plenty both here and hereafter, suffering no shortage of either food for the body or salvation for the soul, even though they often have no surplus.

Thus we see how God deals with the believers in the matter of providing temporal food and of defending their cause against the wicked, to assure us on both counts that He will not forsake us and that we shall have enough to eat. And this is really what happens if we believe and if we do not permit the prosperity of the wicked to irk us or provoke us. Therefore he says in a concluding summary:

27. Depart from evil, and do good; so shall you abide forever.

It is as if he were to say: Let God do the worrying. Just do what is right, and let nothing provoke you into doing wrong. Remain just as you are, and let what happens happen. As St. Peter also says (1 Peter 5:7): "Cast all your anxieties on Him, for He cares about you"; and Ps. 55:22: "Cast your burden on God, and He will sustain you; He will never permit the righteous to be moved."

28. For the Lord loves justice; He will not forsake His saints. The righteous shall be preserved forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.

You must not fear that the justice of your cause is being defeated, for that is impossible. God loves justice; therefore it must be preserved, and the righteous must not be forsaken. If He were an idol who loved injustice or hated justice, as the wicked men do, then you would have reason to worry and to be afraid. But now that you know He loves justice, why do you worry, why are you afraid, why do you doubt? His saints are preserved not only temporally but eternally; and the wicked, with their children and everything they have, are cut off.

Here "saints" does not mean those who are in heaven, about whom the Scriptures speak only rarely, but more generally those who live on earth, who believe in God and by their faith have the grace of God and the Holy Spirit. This is why they are called "saints," as we all are if we truly believe.

29. The righteous shall possess the land, and dwell upon it forever.

That is, as was said earlier,⁷ they have plenty here on earth, and they do not need to look to anyone except God for a place to stay in the world. For God does not forsake them. If He does forsake them, this is a sign that they are unrighteous and wicked, without faith and trust in God. Thus it is settled that we should do only good and remain on our true course in the world, letting Him do the worrying and the working. Now there follows an explanation of the cause of the righteous, which brings on this conflict between him and the wicked.

30. The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice.

This is the basis of the conflict: the wicked refuse to listen to the wisdom and justice of God. They persecute it, condemn and denounce it as foolishness and injustice. Because these rascals are successful at this for a while, the righteous are irked and provoked, and it incites them to wickedness and vengeance or impatience.

Therefore this psalm teaches them to be still and to go right on with their duties: teaching, writing, and speaking wisdom and justice; entrusting their cause to God; letting the wicked bite, rage, scowl, slander, strike, draw their swords, bend their bows, and build up their mobs and their power, as has already been said. For God will set it right, if only we wait for Him to do it, staying on our course, and not letting them make us quit or give up. Ultimately the judgment of this verse must prevail and become as clear as noon: that the righteous man has been speaking justly and wisely, and the wicked have been foolish and unjust.

31. The Law of his God is in his heart; his steps do not slip.

He speaks justice and utters wisdom because the Law of God is not in a book, not in his ears or on his tongue, but in his heart. No one can rightly understand the Law of God unless it is in his heart, and he loves it and lives according to it; this is done by faith in God. Therefore although the wicked make much talk about God and His Law, and boast that they are teachers and experts in the Scriptures, they never speak justice or wisdom. For they do not have it in their heart; therefore they do not understand it. They are deceived by the outward fact that they cite the words of Scripture. For this reason they rage against the righteous and persecute them.

In addition, the steps of the righteous do not slip but go straight ahead, safe and sure, in good conscience, because he is certain of his cause and will not let himself be seduced by the laws and doctrines of men. But the wicked always fall and slide around, and their step is uncertain, because they remove the Law of God from faith and thus misunderstand it. Thus they wander about as their own ideas lead them or the laws of men instruct them to do first this, then that work. First they are instructed to act one way, then another; and they slide around as they are led by the nose, one blind man leading another (Luke 6:39). As they do not understand correctly, so they do not walk correctly. Yet in defense of their slippery teaching and life they rage against the certain teaching and life of the righteous and try to establish their point of view in undisputed control.

32. The wicked watches the righteous, and seeks to slay him.

It is vexing and intolerable to him that his teaching and life should be denounced as unjust and unwise. All he thinks about, therefore, is the substantiation of his cause. He cannot evade the presence of the righteous man who denounces his injustice. His perversion, therefore, brings him to the point where he wants to get rid of the righteous man, to kill him, so that his way of life may be just and blameless. This is what the pope and his followers have always done and are still doing, as we see very well. They do not even have the Law of God in books, much less in their hearts. And yet they claim to be the ones who promulgate wisdom and teach rightly; they never stop raging and bellowing about it like mad dogs.

33. But the Lord will not abandon him to his power, or let him be condemned when he is brought to trial.

God does indeed let the righteous man get into the hands of the wicked, but He does not leave him there. They may kill him, but they will not destroy him. Their judgment is in vain, despite their boast that they are doing it in God's place or in God's name; for the judgment of God is contrary to theirs.

We see this in our times too. The pope and his followers condemned John Hus.⁸ But despite their condemnation, their cries, their alarms, their rage, their anger, their bull, their ammunition, their seal, and their excommunication, he continues to be prominent and famous. No bishop, university, king, or prince has been able to do anything about that. This has never happened to a heretic before. A single

dead man, an innocent Abel, makes the living Cain, the pope, with all his entourage, into heretics, apostates, murderers, and blasphemers, no matter how much they may foam at the mouth about it.

34. *Wait for the Lord, and keep to His way, and He will exalt you to possess the land; you will look on the destruction of the wicked.*

Once more he urges trust in God and well-doing, because our weak and unconverted nature finds it difficult to take a chance on God, to wait for that which it nowhere sees or perceives, and to divest itself of that which it does see and perceive.

We have already pointed out adequately what is meant by “possessing the land,” namely, that a righteous man continues and has plenty even on earth. In addition, if he has too little temporally, he has so much more spiritually, as Christ teaches when He says (Mark 10:29–30): “Whoever has left a single thing will receive a hundredfold in this world, and eternal life besides.”

I do not deny that this “possessing the land” may be understood as applying, not to each separate righteous man individually but to the group or community. Although some are destroyed for a time, their seed and their teaching will ultimately prevail. Thus the Christians have remained in the world, and the heathen have passed away, even though many Christians were tortured and destroyed for a time by the heathen. As Ps. 112:1–2 says, “Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in His commandments! His descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed.”

In addition, however, each individual also has enough for himself, and God gives him what he needs and requests. If God does not give it, the righteous man is so acquiescent that he does not want God to give it to him and forbids God to give it to him. He is so at one with God that in the sight of God he both has and does not have, just as he pleases. As Ps. 145:19 says, “God fulfills the desire of all who fear Him; He also hears their cry, and saves them.”

When he says here: “You will look on the destruction of the wicked,” this does not refer to a simple looking. But in keeping with the usage in the Scriptures it means to look in accordance with one’s wishes, to see what one has long yearned to see, as we say: “That I would like to see!” Thus Ps. 54:7 says: “Thou hast delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies”; that is, I have seen my desires carried out on them, that I was redeemed, and they were destroyed. And Ps. 112:6–8 says: “The righteous will never be moved until he sees his desire on his adversaries.” And Ps. 91:8 says: “You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked.” Again, Ps. 35:21 says of the enemies: “They open wide their mouths against me; they say, ‘Aha, Aha! our eyes have seen it!’” Thus Micah 4:11 says: “Let our eyes gaze upon Zion!”; that is, O that Zion might prevail, as we should like to see it do! This is the usage here too: “You will look at what you have yearned to see: the destruction of the wicked.” This manner of speaking is very common in the Scriptures.

35. *I have seen a wicked man overbearing, and towering like a laurel of Lebanon.*

Here he cites another experience as an illustration and example of the wicked man. Earlier he cited his experience regarding the righteous man: that he had never seen one forsaken. Here he describes his contrary experience regarding the wicked man, who passed away, and he says: He was so rich, mighty, and great that everyone was afraid of him; whatever he said, did, or permitted, that was said, done, and permitted. For this is what the Hebrew word *גָּבַר* means, which I have translated with “overbearing.” It also means what he adds to it: He strutted about and was arrogant, pressed himself to the fore, acted as though he were something special, and towered over everyone else, just as a laurel is always green before the other trees are and has a special glory ahead of the others, especially ahead of the tame trees or garden trees. It is not just an ordinary bush or a lowly tree that needs to be tended and cultivated, something which the wild trees and laurels do not need. So one must look at this wicked nobleman and say: “Gracious sir, dear nobleman!”

36. *When people passed by, lo, he was no more; though I sought him, he could not be found.*

David saw this demonstrated in Saul, Ahithophel, Absalom, and others. They were mighty in their wickedness; but before one could look around, they were gone, until one was prompted to ask: “Where did they go?” Is it not true that in our day Pope Julius was also such a man?⁹ What an *גָּבַר* and terrible lord that was! But how he disappeared before anyone had a chance to look around! Where is he now, where is all his strutting and boasting? Thus we should only be still, and those who are now raging and

trying to storm heaven and overturn boulders will disappear the same way. Let us only be quiet for a while and pass by; when we turn around, they will all be gone, if only we trust God.

37. Preserve your piety, and behold what is upright. Then at last such a man will have peace.

This is equivalent to what Paul says in Titus 2: Just be true in simple faith toward God, and walk uprightly and honestly. Let the wicked be wicked, and you will see that eventually you will have peace and get along well. Where we say in our language: “He is getting along well, he is prospering, everything is fine for him,” and in Latin *valere, bene habere*, and the like, there Hebrew customarily says “to have peace.” Thus in Gen. 37:14 Jacob said to his son Joseph: “Go to Shechem to your brothers, see whether there is peace for them and for the cattle, and come back to tell me”; that is, he was to see whether they were getting along all right. This is the source of the greeting in the Gospel (John 20:19): “peace be with you.” That is a Hebrew way of saying what we would say in German as “God give you a good day, a good morning, a good evening!” When we take leave of someone, we say: “Farewell. Good night. May all go well with you!” That is the meaning of “Peace be with you.” Thus when the wicked man is done for, the righteous and believing man will get along well, and from then on there will be nothing but peace.

38. But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed; the posterity of the wicked shall be cut off.

This is how the tables are turned: the righteous abide and do well, but the apostates are destroyed and do badly both here and hereafter.

These two verses might also be understood as applying to the teachings, heritage, and possessions which are left behind by the two parties. Then the meaning would be as follows. What the righteous leave behind abides and prospers, as verse twenty-six said that the children of the righteous will also have plenty. But everything that the wicked leave behind disappears and vanishes from sight, as Ps. 109:13 says: “His memory will be blotted out in the second generation.” We can see this very thing happening in our everyday experience.

39. The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; He is their refuge in the time of trouble.

Now he gives the reason for what he has said in the preceding two verses. The salvation of the wicked comes from themselves, and their refuge is their own power. They are great and numerous, rich and powerful. They do not need the refuge and salvation that come from God. But the righteous, who must turn their gaze away from everything visible and tangible and trust God alone, have no salvation or refuge except that which comes from God. He does not forsake them, and He does for them what they believe and trust Him to do, as this last verse describes in conclusion:

40. The Lord helps them and delivers them; He delivers them from the wicked, and saves them, because they take refuge in Him.

Look, look, what a rich promise, what a great consolation, what an abundant admonition, if only we trust and believe! First, God helps them in the very midst of evil. He does not leave them lying there but stands by them, strengthens them, and preserves them. Secondly, He not only helps them but delivers them and enables them to escape. For the precise meaning of this Hebrew word is “to escape misfortune and to get away from it.”¹⁰ And as a vexation to the wicked he mentions them by name and says: “He delivers them from the wicked.” They may not like it; but their rage will not do them a bit of good, though they believe that the righteous man will not escape them and will surely be destroyed. Thirdly, He not only delivers them but goes right on helping them, so that they do not remain in any trouble, no matter when it comes. And He does all this because they have trusted in Him. Thus He also says in Ps. 91:14–16: “Because he cleaves to Me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows My name. When he calls to Me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him, and show him My salvation.”

Oh, such shameful disloyalty, mistrust and damnable unbelief! We refuse to believe these rich, powerful, and comforting promises of God. When we hear a few threatening words from the wicked, we begin to tremble at the slightest threat. May God help us to obtain the true faith which we see the Scriptures demanding everywhere! Amen.

PSALM • 62

A Psalm of David for Jeduthun to sing high

THAT is, this psalm was composed by David and arranged for Jeduthun and his associates to sing “high,” that is, with a clear voice. We read in 1 Chron. 25 that David appointed certain singers to sing

“high” with clear cymbals or bells, and others to sing “low” with harps, before the golden ark. Thus he composed and had others compose special psalms for each choir.

1. *My soul is silent before God, for from Him comes my salvation.*

David was a man of considerable training and experience. While he was being brought up and trained at the court of King Saul, he had seen much corruption. The nobles at court curried the king's favor for the sake of money and honor; they put all their reliance on the king's good will, and to please him they would do whatever he wanted, regardless of the laws of God or man. Therefore David himself had to take many hard knocks from them when they saw that the king was hostile to him and wanted to kill him. Similarly, Herod arrested Peter and persecuted the Christians in order to please the Jews (Acts 12:3). Even now we can see that conditions at the courts of the mighty are the same as they have always been. When the sycophants and opportunists see that something pleases the princes and lords and that they stand to make a profit from it, they blithely say and do whatever they think will make a good impression. It does not matter to them whether the poor man and the righteous man stands or falls as a result, just so they become rich and powerful. Indeed, this sort of thing happens not only at the courts of the mighty but in every station in the world. Such is the consistent way and manner of the world. People curry favor in order to make a profit, and they put their reliance on human favor and help. Meanwhile they pay no attention to God and do harm to their neighbor, although they lay claim to piety, to the Word of God and righteousness, as if they were the best people in the world.

David composed this psalm as a salutary instruction and warning against such wicked scoundrels. He instructs us here not to depend on men, not even on lords and kings, but only on God; and he warns us that if we do, it will end tragically. Thus he also says in Ps. 146:3–4: “Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no help. When his breath departs, he returns to his earth; on that very day his plans perish.” It is as if he were saying: The favor of men is inconstant. Friend today, foe tomorrow; or, as the saying goes about princes in particular, “The favor of a prince is as fickle as April weather!”¹¹ But even if it were constant everywhere in life, still their life is not sure for a single hour. Then why do you depend on them? On their account you neglect God, who abides forever, and you offend both Him and your neighbor.

Thus he is using himself as an example here. In Saul's time he saw many who depended on Saul and on his account did things that vexed both God and man; but when Saul was dead, they turned against him, as the son of Doeg came after the death of Saul and tried to curry favor with David by claiming that he had killed Saul.¹²

Therefore he says here: “I have no intention to place my trust in princes or other men, as the wicked sycophants do. I am perfectly willing to be obedient to the king, to serve him, to seek and advance his best interests, to supply my aid and counsel, and to stand by him with my life and property. But to depend on him so that he might make me rich, powerful, or blessed—that is not for me! For tomorrow the weather may change completely, and he will persecute me. (And this is exactly what did happen. At first David was Saul's favorite servant, but then he became his worst enemy. So he learned by experience that the favor of princes is as fickle as April weather, especially when the princes are not God-fearing but wicked.) If, to please my lord, I had done something against God and men, where would I be now, with God and men both hostile to me? Away with the favor of men and of princes! All I want is the favor of God. If I have the favor of God, the favor of men will come soon. And if it does not come, then to the devil with it; the favor of God is enough for me. But if I were to lose the favor of God, the favor of men would finally depart too. I would go to the devil along with my prince, forsaken by both God and men. Therefore I have done well and have made the right choice.”

When he says: “My soul is silent before God,” this is a Hebrew way of speaking, equivalent to this: “The silence of my soul is toward God or for God. That is, I am silent, and I subject myself to the wicked, who strut and boast of their reliance on men and lords. But I entrust myself to God. It is of Him that I boast and strut, but so quietly and privately that they do not realize it and think me a fool because I do not join them in their ambition, flattery, and greed.” Oh, what a rare bird such a courtier is! Yet Saul, the wicked king, had such a courtier; and David was like a rose among the thorns in the midst of these rascals at court. Undoubtedly there can still be a righteous man at court, but he must also be among the thorns and always be prepared to be stuck.

“For from Him comes my salvation,” he says. That is: My friend, there is no one who will help me but God; He is sure. From Him, from Him, it says, from Him comes my salvation, that is, all my happiness, riches, prosperity, and whatever I need and should have. But the wicked say: “My holy father, the pope, my most gracious lord, the emperor, my most gracious King of France, my most gracious Lord of Mainz, my most gracious Lord of Saxony, etc., will help me.” Yes—provided that they do not die tomorrow or do not need the aid and counsel as much as you do, or more!

2. For He is my Refuge, my Salvation, my Defense; therefore I shall stand.

Yes indeed! As long as you believe this, you are really safe, even though it were to rain and snow nothing but Turkish and Tartar sultans and angry kings and princes, with all their power, for nine years without interruption, and all the devils besides!

I have used the word “Refuge” for the Hebrew **צִוְיָה**, which means “a rock.” For we call “refuge” that on which we depend and with which we are comforted. Thus he wants to say now: I know that my salvation comes from Him. Why? Because I have not selected any man, no matter how great, mighty, or rich he might be, as my boast, my refuge, my comfort, and my salvation; nor have I set my heart or my hope on any man. But for this I have chosen God, from whom alone all my happiness and salvation is to come and will come.

He calls God his “Rock” or his “Refuge” because he sets the sure and certain confidence of his heart on Him. He calls Him his “Salvation” because he does not doubt but believes that God will help him with happiness and salvation, though Saul and all men should forsake him and refuse to give him anything, even a place to stay. He calls Him his “Defense” because he hopes and is sure that God will defend him against all evil, though Saul and all his sycophants should seek to destroy and kill him.

What a fine soul it is that can sing such a song to God! But also what a rare soul it is! As a matter of fact, one finds the courts, cities, and lands full of people who are sometimes willing to sing such a song to the bigwigs for a mere ten gulden or even a smaller pittance.

3. How long will you set upon a man to shatter him, all of you, like a leaning wall, a tottering fence?

If I had to use myself as an example, I would correct this psalm by striking out this verse. But the command is (v. 5): “Let my soul be silent before God.” David had experienced the cleverness of those who curry favor with lords. As long as the kings favor was beaming, there was nothing more glorious to them than David, and everyone wanted to be David’s loving friend. Meanwhile their heart was saying: “How I wish the devil would take you right now, so that I could replace you as the kings favorite!” But as soon as the king grew hostile to him, what they had been thinking came forth. Everyone sought to pay court to the king and to do his best for David’s destruction. None of them were idle; no, all of them were ready to kill him with their own hands. Then the saying went around the court, especially if the king or his informer was listening: “Oh, if the pestilence, St. Vitus’ dance, or some other curse would only overtake that scoundrel!” This is what he means when he says here: “How long Will you set upon a man” and all try to bring on his death? It is as if he were saying: “Why is it that a man means so much to you, and God means so little, that for the sake of a man you are willing to commit murder and spend day and night plotting it? Right now it is easy for you, because I am like a leaning wall and a tottering fence. When a wall or a fence is almost touching the ground, it does not take much to finish the job.”

Thus when a prince, lord, or other bigwig oppresses a man, the wall and fence begins to lean. Then the ambitious little men come along and suppose that this is the right time for them to display their courage and win their spurs. They trample on the poor man whom they really ought to help; instead of strengthening the fence and shoring up the wall, they help to knock it down. This is what is called yanking the beard of the dead lion, which they would be afraid to touch if he were alive.¹³

Those who helped to oppress David when he was on the outs with Saul had to take off their hats before him when he was back in Saul’s good graces. But the world never acts differently, and one should guide oneself accordingly. Christ Himself had to have someone to help smash Him when He was already being hounded to death by the Jews, namely, the traitor Judas. As He says in Ps. 41:9: “He who ate of My bread has lifted his heel against Me.” So it happens and must happen, both in the spiritual and in the secular realm, that the brave heroes will take on a dead lion even though they cannot defend themselves against a live dog. This is all you can expect from a trust in men.

4. They only plan to thrust him down from his eminence. They take pleasure in falsehood. They bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse. Selah.

All they are interested in is knocking him over and taking his place. For so it happens in the world: if someone is elevated even a little bit, people are not satisfied until they drag him all the way down. The prince of the world, the devil, is such an evil spirit that he cannot stand it if someone becomes great even physically; much less can he stand it if someone becomes rich spiritually.

They take pleasure in falsehood.

That is, to accomplish their ends they put forth nothing but falsehood. They speak lovely words, but there is nothing behind them. That is their joy and pleasure. They may act and speak with their intended victim in the friendliest manner and yet be thinking to themselves: “The plague take you!” And they will not stop until they help to destroy him. This is the meaning of: “They bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse.” In their heart they wish him all kinds of anguish, and yet they say: “I am at your service. You will always find me willing to do whatever I can.” Don’t count on it, and be sure to check the ingredients before you put it in the oven!

Such tricks are especially vicious in spiritual matters having to do with the Gospel. The false brethren and sectarians claim to be Christian brethren, but actually they are desperate scoundrels and fanatics. All they want to do is to soar on high and get all the glory, but their mouth is full of blessing and pious talk about seeking the truth and the glory of God.

5. But let my soul be silent before God, for my hope is from Him.

Since Saul’s courtiers and the whole world and these false spirits are all so false, what is a pious heart to do? Nothing else than to be silent and still. Let them lie, deceive, and think and do evil. Commit your cause and yourself to God, and hope in Him. Let them serve men and princes with their lies and wicked deceptions; let them put their hopes there. We shall see whose hope is the best!

6. God is my Refuge, my Salvation, and my Defense; I shall not be shaken.

He repeats this verse as a defiance of the hypocrites and a comfort for his heart and ours. With it he concludes his illustration and instruction about the nature and activity of the world, so that we might be courageous in our contempt of it. You may repeat here what was said in the other verse, for the two verses are the same.

7. On God rests my salvation and my glory, the rock of my might; my Refuge is God.

Now he begins his warning and exhortation, for he contrasts God and man. It is as if he were saying: “All right, you have heard my description of conditions in the world, and especially at court, where the world is at its highest and best. Now if you contrast God and man, you will discover exactly what I have discovered, namely, that ‘on God rests my salvation and my glory, etc.’ That is, God is both willing and able to help. He gives health, happiness, and salvation. You can depend on this. He is also my ‘Glory’; that is, He also provides me with enough possessions, power, and prestige, all of which are glorious things.” In the Scriptures “glory” means not only a good reputation but the possessions on which the good reputation is based. Thus Matt. 6:29 says: “I tell you, Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” And Ps. 106:20: “They exchanged their glory for the image of a calf,” that is, their God and their worship of God. The wicked, however, try to find their glory in mere human princes.

“The rock of my might”; that is, He is the firm foundation on which my power and authority rests. Here, as elsewhere, “might” means the power or capacity to rule, as in a principality or kingdom. He mentions it here in order to include everything in this one verse— “my salvation,” that is, all my happiness and well-being; “my glory,” that is, all my property and ability; “my might,” that is, all my power and authority. In sum, whatever I can have on earth—health, strength, property, glory, good reputation, power, authority, and everything else—I refuse to commit or entrust it to the emperor, to kings or princes, or to any other man; nor do I expect to get it from any of these. I shall let it stand or fall, come and go, with God. If He holds it up, it will stay, even though the whole world should want to knock it over. If He knocks it over, it will fall over, even though the whole world should want to hold it up. Therefore he says: “My Refuge is God.” Not only shall I expect good from Him, but under His protection I shall bid defiance to every adversity; for I am confident that He will not forsake me. Men will always forsake you, and refuge with them is never certain.

8. Trust in Him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before Him; God is a Refuge for us. Selah.

Now since God acts this way toward me, come, follow me faithfully, and He will act this way toward us all. I have experienced it; therefore I may confidently give you this advice. Let Saul, the pope, the emperor, the king, the princes, and everybody be angry! Do not be afraid of them, but hope in God;

for He will not let you down. Again, let Saul, the pope, the emperor, the king, the princes, and everybody laugh, comfort, and make promises! Do not pin your hopes on them, and do not depend on them; for both their strength and their courage are uncertain. Strength fades, courage fails; God remains firm. In times of adversity and in times of prosperity, therefore, you may depend on God. If you are lacking something, well, here is good advice: “Pour out your heart before Him.” Voice your complaint freely, and do not conceal anything from Him. Regardless of what it is, just throw it in a pile before Him, as you open your heart completely to a good friend. He wants to hear it, and He wants to give you His aid and counsel. Do not be bashful before Him, and do not think that what you ask is too big or too much. Come right out with it, even if all you have is bags full of need. Out with everything; God is greater and more able and more willing than all our transgressions. Do not dribble your requests before Him; God is not a man whom you can overburden with your begging and asking. The more you ask, the happier He is to hear you. Only pour it all out, do not dribble or drip it. For He will not drip or dribble either, but He will flood you with a veritable deluge.

“God is a Refuge for us,” our Hiding Place, He and no one else. All the others are too puny for us to pour out our hearts before them. If I were to let just one drop of my heart fall before the emperor, he himself would have to become a beggar; for he would be unable to satisfy my wish. Then why should I look to him or take refuge in him when I need to pour out my heart continually? Indeed, men are good for nothing, as the next verse says:

9. But men are but vanity, people are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than vanity.

You have heard what God is, but now hear what men are. They are good for nothing, he says. If you depend on them, you should know that you are depending on sheer nothing, and that it will certainly fail you. Yes, he says, if one were to put them on a balance—men on one pan, vanity or nothing on the other pan—the men would be lighter than the nothing. We Germans would render this Hebrew way of speaking with: “Men amount to less than nothing”; for what they call “vanity,” that we call “nothing.” As Solomon says (Eccl. 1:2), “It is all vanity and nothing but vanity,” that is, human baubles amount to nothing, exactly nothing.

Here you may ask: “What? Is humanity worth nothing, even though it is a creature of God?” I answer: David is not speaking about the creature as such but about the use of the creature. That is, humanity is certainly a good thing; but it is not put to good use. Being a prince, a king, or an emperor is also a good thing; but it is not put to good use either. In what way? Because people try to put their trust in them and to build on them. For such use they are worth nothing. Why? Because they are uncertain in their hearts and in their lives. Sand and water are a good thing too; but if I wanted to build a house on them, they would be worth nothing and less than nothing. When I drink water, however, or wash with it, then it is not worthless but a precious and useful thing; for this is what it was made for, this is its proper use. Thus also prince, king, and emperor were made to keep peace in the land, etc.; for this purpose they are creatures of God and a good thing. But for me to trust in they are worthless. He does not say: “Do not obey princes” but: “Do not put your trust in princes” (Ps. 146:3); trust belongs to God alone. You should not exchange gold for manure. Manure has its uses; but if it is palmed off as gold, it is worthless. You see that this psalm is talking only about faith, trust, confidence, reliance—all terms which are too sublime to apply to princes and other human beings. Nevertheless, the world consistently trusts in men and does not put its confidence in God; that is, it is nothing, and it trusts in nothing.

How is it possible that men are lighter or smaller than nothing? What can be smaller than nothing? I answer: That which is obviously nothing does not deceive anyone. But anyone who trusts in that which is nothing suffers a twofold loss: first, because he finds nothing; secondly, because he loses what he has expended on it. Anyone who has a mere nothing has a simple nothing and does not expend anything on it. But anyone who trusts in men not only finds nothing but loses what he has expended on them. Thus his hope and his expense come to naught on the nothing in which he hoped. Therefore it is correct to say that a man is less than nothing. The world does not give up trusting in men; inevitably, therefore, it will vainly trust in nothing. What a high valuation to put on all of us who are called men, to say that we are less than nothing! That shows how much one of us can avail for the other!

10. Put no confidence in extortion, set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, set not your heart on them.

Here he concludes the psalm on a threatening note, terrifying the wicked with God's power, judgment, and punishment. He wants to say: It tickles you and makes you feel so good that you are at court and have Saul as your gracious lord. Now you are all set! You imagine that you have a safe seat. It does not bother you, but it only amuses you that you do me an injustice or bully and beat me and people like me. We have to take it from you and dare not denounce you. For your lord is guarding you, and you are depending on him. But I advise you not to do this. Do not be too certain and smug. Do not set vain hopes; that is, do not build your hopes on princes and other men who are a mere nothing. For if you do, you, too, will be nothing; that is, you will be dealing with nothing, you win gain nothing, and everything will vanish.

I will go farther and say: Even if you should become rich justly and with God's help, do not depend on this either, and do not make mammon your god. Property is not given to you for you to build your trust on or boast about, all of which is vanity and nothing, but for you to use, enjoy, and share with others. But men are not content with this. They make princes and property their boast and build their confidence on them, that is, on nothing; and nothing is what they get from the deal. For gold makes one bold; but it is not really gold, and it does not keep one bold.¹⁴ Setting one's heart on something is equivalent to becoming involved with it; not to set one's heart on it means not to become involved with it and to have it as though one did not have it. For this is what the Hebrew says: "to put it over one's heart" or "to put it into one's heart," to become involved with it and to take it to heart. Possessions belong in your hands, not in your heart, as Paul says in 1 Cor. 7:31 that we should deal with the world as though we had no dealings with it.

11. *Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God.*

In our language we would say it this way: There is one thing that I know for sure. For God Himself has spoken it, and He cannot lie. God is Lord, as I have heard more than once. Do not be so wicked and vain. But if you refuse to listen, and want to make men your boast, very well. Then I will tell you that power belongs to God, and that He is the real emperor, king, prince, and lord over everyone, even over you and over your lords. To this you should listen. For God Himself has spoken it, and I have often heard it and experienced a demonstration of it when He put down the mighty from their thrones (Luke 1:52). Be sure that this does not happen to your lords! Let Saul be Saul; let the emperor be the emperor; let the princes be princes; let men be men! But fear God! For it is only one little word, that God has "power"; but the word is loud and clear. The truth of it has been experienced over and over. Surely He will not spare you or pass you by, even though you now despise Him in your vanity and unjustly abuse us at the behest of other men.

12. *And to Thee, O Lord, belongs steadfast love. For Thou dost requite a man according to his work.*

God has power to punish all the wicked severely, and they cannot escape Him; for He alone is the Lord, and all lordship is His and proceeds from Him. In the same way He is also kind and merciful to help the suffering. He cannot let them be destroyed, vanquished by the hypocrites and the Saulites, and forsaken. But, as it is written in Luke 1:52, He exalts those of low degree in the same way that He puts down the mighty from their thrones—the latter through His power, the former through His steadfast love. Therefore the psalmist continues:

"Thou dost requite a man according to his work." He requites the wicked with power, just as they have exercised power; and he requites the poor with love and grace, just as they have been loving and gracious and without power. But the world does not care about this. It goes right ahead in its vanity and blasphemy. God lets this happen, and He goes right ahead too with His power and His steadfast love. Thus there have been many demonstrations of this one word of God among the many words of God, and there have been all sorts of histories to explain this one text. As a powerful Lord, God overthrows and breaks the bigwigs; and as a gracious and loving Father, He helps the poor and forsaken.

He showed this in the cases of Saul and David. He is showing it now in the cases of the pope and the Gospel, of the bishops and the Christians. And He will go on showing it more and more until they are brought down and learn by experience that what David says here is true: this is only a single word of God, that He is powerful and loving; but it is often heard and repeatedly experienced. He who has ears to hear, let him hear (Mark 4:9)!

PSALM • 94

1. *O Lord, Thou God of vengeance, Thou God of vengeance, shine forth!*

THIS psalm is clearly a prayer that is common to all the pious children of God and members of His spiritual people, to be prayed against all their persecutors. Therefore it can be prayed from the beginning of the world to its end by all pious and devout people, be they Jews, Christians, or patriarchs. For they all have to suffer from the two groups of persecutors about whom this psalm complains: first, the tyrants, who use force to persecute the body on account of the Word; secondly, the false teachers, heretics, and sectarians, who use lies and mockery to persecute the soul.

For this reason we, too, may pray this psalm in our day against both groups: the pope and the bishops, the princes and lords, who use force to persecute us physically on account of the Gospel; and the sectarians, who persecute us spiritually with their false and perverted interpretation of the Scriptures. In the same way the pious and faithful Jews prayed it against both groups: the Gentiles, who raged about them and continually persecuted them; and the false prophets, who arose in their midst and misled the people with their perverted understanding of the Scriptures. Therefore he says now:

“O Lord, Thou art a God of vengeance, that is, Thou alone art the Avenger and Punisher of all wickedness, both physical and spiritual.” He says “God of vengeance” twice, as people tend to do when they are excited and very earnest; they will say something over and over to stir God. Another reason he says it twice is to indicate that he is complaining about two groups of persecutors and asking for vengeance and punishment on both of them—tyrants and heretics.

“God of vengeance” is a Hebrew way of speaking; it means “He who alone can and should take vengeance.” Paul, too, often uses this way of speaking, as in Rom. 15:13: “the God of hope” and in Rom. 15:5: “the God of steadfastness and encouragement.” In 2 Cor. 1:3 he says: “Blessed be God, the Father of all mercies and God of comfort,” that is, God, who gives hope, patience, and comfort. So also here “God of vengeance” means “the one who takes vengeance.” For the Scriptures give Him His names on the basis of His works. But because no one but God can do such works, no one but God is entitled to the names that are based on such works. No one but God can give comfort, hope, patience, and the like; thus also no one but God can punish sin and avenge evil. How could men avenge all evil when they cannot even know all evil? Indeed, they regard most evil as virtue, though it is evil and deserves to be avenged, just as the hypocrites regard their teaching and works as good and refuse to let this be identified and denounced, though it is nothing but wickedness. Therefore the name “God of vengeance,” like “God of steadfastness” and “God of hope,” is appropriate only to God.

“Shine forth!” he says. The word הוֹפִי־נִי means “to come out,” “to break forth,” as a beam does, “to become visible and evident to everyone.” Thus Moses says in Deut. 33:2: “The Lord came from Sinai, and dawned from Seir upon us; He shone forth from Mt. Paran.” What he wants to say here is this: “Tyrants and false prophets have the upper hand. They have come to the fore and have made themselves evident, and they are well established. But Thou art altogether silent. Thou dost conceal Thyself as though Thou wert buried and unable to act, for Thou dost not prevent or punish such wickedness. Therefore we ask Thee to shine forth, peek out, and let Thy countenance look out at them—and to do it soon! For Thou art a God of vengeance, and it is fitting for Thee to avenge and punish. Avenge Thyself then! If vengeance is Thy work and is so very necessary now, why dost Thou conceal Thyself in the darkness and make Thyself so invisible?”

Here the question may arise how pious and spiritual people can ask for vengeance when Christ says in Matt. 5:44: “Pray for your persecutors, do good to those who hate you, love your enemies.” In other words, desiring vengeance and punishment conflicts with love toward the neighbor, since we ought to desire and do only good (Rom. 12:17). I reply: There is a distinction between faith and love. Faith tolerates nothing, love tolerates everything; faith curses, love blesses; faith seeks vengeance and punishment, love seeks reprieve and forgiveness. Therefore where faith and the Word of God are at stake, it is not right to love or to be patient but only to be angry, zealous, and reproving. That is how all the prophets behaved; in matters of faith they manifested no patience or kindness. But since this psalm becomes more vehement later on and not only asks for vengeance but actually curses, we shall postpone a more detailed reply until then.¹⁵

2. Rise up, O Judge of the earth; render to the proud their deserts!

Just as God alone is the Avenger, so He alone is Judge of the earth. For all the judging and avenging done by the government comes from His command and ordinance, as though He were doing it Himself. But what the government cannot judge or avenge, that He does, so that it may be true that He alone is

the Avenger and Judge of the earth, as Ps. 7:8 says: “The Lord judges the people.” Now because He is the Avenger and Judge, pious men ask Him to rise up, that is, to take His seat high up as Judge, to demonstrate His work, and not to let Himself be suppressed as though He were nothing. He says everything two ways in this prayer. He invokes God as Avenger and as Judge, as though it were not enough for Him to be only the Avenger. He is serious about this; and, as we said earlier, he is praying against two groups of enemies. Very fittingly he asks for vengeance on the tyrants and for a judgment on the false teachers. For the tyrants operate by brute force, without any attempt to conceal it; therefore they deserve vengeance and are already condemned. But the sects dress themselves up and put on a fine front; therefore they must be condemned by means of a trial and a judgment.

By the “proud” here he means not only those who are arrogant in their hearts but also those who have gained the upper hand by either persecution or deceit (he is talking about both the tyrants and the heretics) and act as though they had already prevailed and smothered the pious. This is also the meaning of our word “proud,” those who fly high and soar,¹⁶ as it is of the Hebrew word *וָעָלָה*, just as Moses says about God Himself in his song in Ex. 15:1: “The Lord rides high.” Thus the meaning here is as follows:

“Isn’t it time to judge and to avenge? Thou hast kept silence until both the tyrants and the heretics have prevailed. They are soaring high and celebrating a triumph, as though they had managed to smother us altogether, as though they were everything, and we were nothing.” Whenever I use the two words “tyrants” and “heretics,” I mean by them the two groups of persecutors of all the pious children of God. Thus it will not be necessary for me each time to mention the Gentiles and the false prophets in the Old Testament, the tyrants and the heretics in the New Testament, and the princes and the fanatics in our day. With these two words I wish to designate all the persecutors of the Word, past, present, and future, who are of two kinds, as I have said.

3. *O Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?*

That is: “Thou hast permitted them to go so far and to gain the upper hand so completely that they have become smug. They are boasting, rejoicing, singing, and dancing, as though we were done for. All Thou art doing while this triumph continues so long is looking on! Even a pious man might get the impression that Thou and Thy Word amount to nothing.” But God does not act otherwise; He lets them continue so long to make us ask Him. Here you see once more that he mentions the “wicked” twice in order to complain about the two groups of persecutors.

4. *They pour out their arrogant words, they boast, all the evildoers.*

This verse cannot be translated literally from Hebrew into our language; therefore we must help it along. What it means is this. Both the tyrants and the heretics have become very mighty. The tyrants pour out their bragging words as though their cause were everything and our cause were nothing. Likewise the heretics have begun to pour them out until their dreams are all you can hear. Our teaching and faith hardly dare peep. This is what happens when sects and tyrannies arise. They intrude themselves and grow until people pay attention to nothing else and refuse to listen. Thus St. Paul says in 2 Thess. 2:11: “God sends upon them a strong delusion”; and again in 2 Tim. 3:8: “They oppose the truth”; and again in 2 Tim. 3:13: “The wicked go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived.”

Therefore the Hebrew reads as follows: “They spill over an old thing with their speech, and all the wicked make themselves braggarts.” Just as a boiling kettle runs over and spills out, so they run over and spill out with all the bragging that fills their heart. For the great heat and desire of their dreams is boiling and cooking, and they can neither keep quiet nor listen to anyone else.

He calls the subject of their speaking “an old thing,” that is, stiff, hard, and firm, something that is not new. For what is still new is not yet so well established and firmly set; it can still be bent, twisted, or changed. But what is old is well established and firmly set; people are accustomed to it and like to stick to it. You can’t teach an old dog new tricks, and you can’t make an old scoundrel pious. Thus the heretics are stiff and unbending in their teaching, and they brag much about it. So Hannah sings in 1 Sam. 2:3: “Keep the old thing out of your mouth”; Ps. 31:18 says: “Let the lips be dumb which speak something old against the righteous”; and Ps. 75:5 says: “Do not lift up your horn on high, or speak something old.”

5. *They crush Thy people, O Lord, and afflict Thy heritage.*

This is what the tyrants do when they use force to persecute the Word of God and to kill and torment people for its sake; and the heretics help them along. Of this he now complains to God and asks for vengeance. The Gentiles treated the Jews this way, and the Romans treated the Christians this way. Now the bishops and the princes are treating us this way, and they will get what the earlier persecutors got. For God cannot ignore a prayer which reminds Him that His people and His heritage are being destroyed.

6. They slay the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless.

The tyrants and heretics are so ferocious and so smug that they not only persecute the people of God but do not spare even the poorest among the people, the widows and orphans, who surely deserve pity if anyone does. There is no pity in the persecutors of the Word of God, for the devil is more in control of them than of anyone else. The devil hates the Word of God more than any other thing.

7. And they say: The Lord does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive.

This does not mean that they deny God altogether. For the existence of God is not at issue, and they all acknowledge God. Indeed, the persecutors suppose that God is on their side and that they are offering service to God when they persecute the pious (John 16:2). What is at issue is the Word and the works of God. The persecutors refuse to admit that this is the Word of God; they condemn it and regard the pious as fools and deceivers. Therefore they say: "Let us choke these deceivers, for their God is nothing. What they are telling us is a lie. Their God neither sees nor hears. He neither will nor can take vengeance on us for this, even if He wants to." So stiff, self-confident, and smug are they in their ideas and their unbelief!

8. Understand, O dumbest of the people! Fools, when will you be wise?

It irks the prophet and, for that matter, any Christian that people refuse to accept Him as God whose Word is his boast. Therefore he gets into a squabble with them on God's account and in defense of God's glory. He calls them "fools" and the "dumbest of the people," though they give the appearance of being very wise and are regarded as outstanding teachers. But he says: "They are fools, and they are making fools of the people too."

9. He who planted the ear, does He not hear? He who formed the eye, does He not see?

That is: "Our God, whose Word we have and whose work we proclaim, is the true God, Creator of all things. And you blaspheme Him when you say: 'He does not see or perceive anything.' Rather, it is your god who is vanity and nothing, as are your thoughts about him. (This will come later.) If He is the true God, why would He grant to others the good and useful gifts of sight and hearing, and Himself be unable to see and hear what concerns Him, what is done against Him or for Him? Then He would have to grant something that He does not have. But since He does grant ears and eyes, you must be utterly blind and mad fools not to know Him and to say that He does not see and hear.

10. He who chastens the Gentiles, does He not chastise? He teaches men knowledge.

"When the Gentiles and the whole world punish evil and chastise mischievous children and rascals, this comes from our God, who enables them to know and do this. Would He Himself be unable to chastise and chasten those who are mischievous against Him? If you can chastise what you regard as mischief, can He not chastise what He regards as mischief, since you learned about it from Him? If you, fools that you are, can still see and hear what you regard as mischievous or good, should He not be able to see and hear what He regards as mischievous or good, since He is the one who enables you to see and hear? As Christ says in Matt. 7:11: 'If you, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him?' For God enables you to know this and everything else that you know." Yet all this squabbling is useless. In their vanity and stubbornness they stick to the same old ideas.

11. The Lord knows the thoughts of man, that they are but a breath.

This is as if he were saying: It is all in vain. They are not being converted, but they go right ahead in their opinion that their campaign against us must succeed. But our joy and comfort is that it will not succeed, for God is laughing at them and all their smart ideas and fancy plans. He knows that they are but a breath, that is, that they are nothing and that nothing is exactly what will come of their plans. We must only wait it out, for in just a little while everyone will come to recognize that their campaign actually amounts to nothing. As Ps. 33:10-11 says, "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nought; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the thoughts of

His heart to all generations.” Ps. 2:1–2. testifies that the Gentiles rage in vain, the kings set themselves without success, and the princes take futile counsel against the Lord and His Christ. For He laughs at them and mocks them because they cannot accomplish their goal. Ps. 21:11 says: “If they plan evil against you, if they devise mischief, they will not succeed.” In 1 Cor. 3:20 St. Paul quotes our passage this way: “The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.” For it is the wise people who make the biggest and the most ambitious plans; they try to advise everybody and to set the world straight. But it is all futile.

12. *Blessed is the man whom Thou dost chasten, O Lord, and whom Thou dost teach out of Thy Law.*

We should thank God, he says, for granting us the great favor of knowing that the plans and actions of the wicked are futile and fleeting, in spite of their self-confidence and the success which makes them exult, sing, and speak so boastfully. The pious, meanwhile, amount to nothing; indeed, they are persecuted and killed, as has been said above.

Here human nature and reason is impotent and ignorant of the true state of affairs. It judges on the basis of its feelings and no more; it cannot see anything that is still far away in the future, but it clings to what is present. This is why he says here that God must be a disciplinarian and teach this. Blessed are those whom He teaches!

But where does He teach it? Does He impart it to each person individually? By no means. He teaches it out of His Law; that is, He teaches it to us out of the Sacred Scriptures. There we find both precepts and examples to tell us that the plans and actions of the wicked are fleeting and have always been futile. There you can see what happened to Pharaoh, Sihon, Og (Num. 21), and all the kings of the Gentiles; throughout the Bible you will find that their ideas have always been a failure. So also Ps. 73:16–17 speaks about the prosperity of the wicked: “When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task [that is, I could not grasp it with my reason], until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.” That is, I found it in the Sacred Scriptures. There I learned to look, not at the present but at their end and their eventual outcome. There I saw that despite their magnificent appearance they amount to nothing.

This also provides an answer to the question which the weak ask: “You say that the plans and actions of the wicked are futile, but I see them accomplishing great things. What about this?” I reply: Yes, they have to begin something; but watch how they finish it! For they plan not only to begin it but to finish it. Alexander the Great began many great things, more than he himself knew. But his ultimate plan was even greater, namely, to conquer the whole world. And we know that he failed in this. The Romans also intended to establish an eternal empire, as Vergil says: “An empire without end”;¹⁷ but we know that they failed in this too. The Turk has also accomplished much, and he has even greater plans; but these plans, too, must fail. How miserable has been the continual failure of the pope, of great kings and princes in our own day! And yet they do not fear God, nor do they desist from their wicked plans. They do not believe and ask God for His grace, nor do they entrust their cause to Him. Therefore failing and falling is all you see them do.

Principally, however, we are discussing the undertakings of the wicked in opposition to the pious and to the Word of God. For when one wicked man battles against another, it comes out any way God pleases; this comfort does not apply there. For the Scriptures do not comfort the wicked or give them any promises, even though such smug and conceited plans always fail too. The comfort of the Scriptures, therefore, is their instruction to us not to look at how the wicked begin but to wait and watch how they achieve what they planned. Their plan is simply to wipe out the people of God and the Word of God. But then the tables are turned; they are destroyed, while God remains with those who are His, although at the beginning some of these are persecuted and killed. Thus St. Paul also testifies about the Scriptures in Rom. 15:4: “Whatever was written, was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope,” as the following verse also says:

13. *That he might be still in days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked.*

“Still” means patient, not raging or angry with the persecutors who are bringing days of trouble upon him. By “days of trouble” he means the time when the tyrants and heretics rage, that is, launch their campaign. For the tyrants attack body and property; the heretics attack soul and spirit. How can there be good days when body and soul are in daily peril? Thus St. Paul also says (Eph. 5:16) that “the days are evil.” This agrees especially well with this psalm, as does the following verse (Eph. 5:17), which teaches

us to comfort ourselves with the Sacred Scriptures and to be patient in any persecution. But that is the usual course of the Gospel or the Word of God. When it arrives on the scene, days of trouble begin. The reason for this is that the devil cannot stand it and goes to work raising up tyrants and heretics. Hence there is never less peace, and there are never more wicked people and more offenses than in a time of grace and peace. In other words, when the grace of God and peace are being proclaimed, which happens through the Gospel, it is amazing that people are more wicked than they used to be. But this is how it must be; for here you see him complaining about days of trouble and urging stillness and patience, which are unnecessary in good days.

This stillness and patience are not supposed to be eternal, for the end is already in sight. The wicked will not accomplish their end, as the psalm says: “Their pit and their destruction are at hand.” St. Peter agrees with this verse when he says (2 Peter 2:1): “They are bringing upon themselves swift destruction.” For in Hebrew this verse could also read: “until destruction is dug for the wicked.” “Destruction” and “pit” are synonyms. God must teach us all this in days of trouble, to make us believe that the wicked will be destroyed. To our reason it seems that the pious will be destroyed and that the wicked will abide forever, because everything looks so bleak.

14. For the Lord will not forsake His people; He will not abandon His heritage.

This makes it clear that this psalm is speaking about the plans of the wicked against the people of God. For God cannot forsake His own; this is certain, as he says here. Therefore it is impossible for the wicked to accomplish what they set out to do. It must fail, as certainly as God is God. Only there must first be days of trouble, in which one must be still and patient while the wicked begin their campaign and then come to naught. As Ps. 91:8 also says, “You will look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked.” If you are killed before seeing it in this life, you will come back to life and see it in the life to come. But the living will see it even in this life.

For those who believe it, then, this verse comforts the pious and emboldens them mightily, while it pronounces a fearful judgment on the tyrants and the heretics. For this is the certain outcome, in spite of thousands upon thousands of popes, emperors, princes, scholars, and heretics piled on top of one another, just as the following verse also says:

15. For justice will return to the righteous, and all the upright in heart will follow it.

From what I know about Hebrew¹⁸ it seems to me that the original of this verse means: “For righteousness will still restore justice.” In days of trouble might makes right, and lies pass for truth; but eventually injustice and deception will not abide. Righteousness will arise and make its presence felt, crushing injustice and magnifying justice. Although the whole world will not accept justice, the pious will perform it anyway, doing what is honest and upright that justice may remain and injustice be put down.

Just look at the example of John Hus.¹⁹ In the day of trouble he was condemned, violently and unjustly, but now righteousness has made its presence felt and is vindicating him. And everything the papacy has tried to do against him—all its excommunications, its preaching, its burning, its ranting—has been unable to prevent this; their plans have failed. The same thing happened to the Jews in their plans against Christ and to the Romans in their plans against the Christians.

16. Who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against evildoers?

Here he begins to thank God for providing him with this comfort and insight. What he intends to say is this: “When the wicked rose up against me, there was no one else who stood by me; I was alone and forsaken. Everyone supposed that I was done for and that the wicked had won out.” As another psalm says (25:16): “Be gracious to me, for I am lonely.” That is, no one will comfort me, and everyone is despairing of me except God, my Master and my Teacher. As the next verse says:

17. If the Lord had not been my help, my soul would soon have dwelt in the land of silence.

If it had been up to my own resources and those of other people, I would have been ruined, and the wicked would have achieved a splendid success against me; for everyone else deserted me, and my own heart was palpitating. But it is God who gives me patience, who instructs me above and beyond my reason, who topples the wicked. He permits me to suffer so terribly at the hands of the wicked to teach me that I would be ruined without His help and that my own power is useless. Thus this verse and the two that follow are nothing but a thanksgiving for the grace that God comforts us in the day of trouble, when the tyrants and the heretics rage, as we have heard.

“To dwell in the land of silence” is שִׁמּוּט in Hebrew, and it denotes a different silence from the one spoken of earlier. It refers to the silence when a thing no longer exists, when it can no longer be seen, heard, or felt, like the silence of the dead, who have completely disappeared from sight and perception. Hence it is used by the Hebrews for hell, that is, for the place where the dead are (whatever it may be). He intends, therefore, to say: My soul, that is, my life, would have been wiped out completely, like a man who is dead and buried; for that was how he felt in the day of trouble.

18. *When I thought, My foot slips, Thy steadfast love, O Lord, gave me balm.*

This, too, is part of his thanksgiving, as he shows what kind of thoughts he had in the day of trouble. I thought, he says, “My foot slips.” That is, I began to despair and to be convinced that I would be destroyed and the wicked would prevail eternally. Every genuine temptation has to bring a man to the point of despair, as though his enemies had won out and he had lost. Then the “steadfast love” of God comes and “gives him balm.” That is, He comforts him through the Holy Scriptures, as we have said above, and assures him that the wicked will not succeed and that God’s own people will not be forsaken.

19. *When the cares of my heart were many, Thy consolations cheered my soul.*

The meaning of this verse is almost the same as that of the preceding. The preceding verse gives voice to the despair he felt in the day of trouble, and it describes the balm he received by the grace of God in the Scriptures. This verse describes the various thoughts of escape which one has amid such despair. He looks hither and yon into every nook and cranny, but there is no escape. Thus he says now: “When I was in torment and was trying to find comfort and could not, Thou didst come to prop me up with Thy comfort. Thou didst address me kindly through the statements and stories of the Holy Scriptures. Therefore I can say (v. 12): ‘Blessed is the man whom Thou dost chasten and teach out of Thy Law.’ ”

20. *Has the wicked seat any fellowship with Thee, who commands labor by statute?*

For shame! What are our teachers and preachers really doing when they fail to show how a soul is to be comforted out of the Scriptures? How sharply they clash with Thee! And their seat has no fellowship with Thee. Thou dost teach altogether differently. They sit on the seat; they are teachers and have the keys to knowledge. But what do they teach? They teach misery and heartache! The word הָיוֹרָה means “trouble” and “heartache,” as in German we say of a scoundrel: “You are asking for trouble,” that is, you will commit a wrong that will bring heartache and all sorts of evil upon you. Thus “trouble” in this saying means both the transgression and the punishment. By the seat הָיוֹרָה he means here the accursed preachers who bring heartache upon people because they teach and live wrongly and are, therefore, subject to God’s punishment. They know very well how to bind, fasten, and pervert consciences, but not how to give them comfort and balm.

In the same way “they command labor by statute.” That is, they enact many laws, command this and that, and create labor for people. As Christ says in Matt. 23:4, “They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders.” The purpose of all this is to persuade God to remove the anguish and persecution. They want to abolish evil simply by their own works, when they should urge patience and trust in the grace and mercy of God. In our own day, similarly, when a disaster is threatening, the preachers urge people to go on procession, to fast, and to do this or that. In other words, with their terrible statutes they command labor not only for people but for bells, candles, incense, etc. But meanwhile no one preaches about patience or the steadfast love of God. The preachers among the Jews were doing the same thing, as he complains here. For the precise meaning of the word חֻקִּים which appears here, is the commandments which are arranged and set down each day, what are called ceremonies or external rites. He says that the wicked seat commands and invents them; that is, God did not prescribe them, but people made them up out of their own heads.

21. *They band together against the life of the righteous, and condemn innocent blood.*

Such actions, too, are quite understandable. Instead of preaching about the comfort and grace of God, they stand pat and cling firmly to their invented statutes. When anyone refuses to obey them or speaks against them, as the righteous do, they show neither kindness nor patience. “They band together against them”; they arm themselves with all their weapons, power, and might against them. This is to be the greatest of battles with the greatest of weapons. Swords are not enough; no, water, fire, earth, air, and everything must go to war against the righteous. Thus they “condemn innocent blood,” although

they suppose that they are offering service to God (John 16:2). So it is that their seat is utterly inconsistent with the Law and teaching of God. These are the heretics and false teachers of whom we spoke earlier. But just as the tyrants get what is coming to them, so also the heretics will not be able to escape their judgment, which will be described later.

22. But the Lord is my Stronghold, and my God the Refuge of my confidence.

Let them preach, rage, and slaughter all they please! I am safe against them and mightily defended, for God is my Stronghold. Our teaching must abide, their fiction must pass away; for God is our Stronghold. Therefore we shall remain safe against them both here and hereafter, for our God is our Refuge; He makes us bold and secure. Not only that, but as a God of vengeance He will also destroy them, as the next verse says:

23. He will bring back on them their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness; the Lord our God will wipe them out.

Here is the ultimate and certain judgment: God will not let their wickedness go unnoticed but will wipe them all out in their wickedness, and their wickedness will stop. And this will be done by “our God,” whose Word we speak and whom they do not regard as God at all, supposing as they do that God is on their side, as we have heard above. Whoever believes this and is instructed by God can be patient and permit the wicked to rage, for he considers their end and waits it out.

PSALM • 109

A Psalm of David, to be sung high

WE explained earlier what this “singing high” means.²⁰ David composed this psalm about Christ, who speaks the entire psalm in the first person against Judas, His betrayer, and against Judaism as a whole, describing their ultimate fate. In Acts 1:20 St. Peter applied this psalm to Judas when they were selecting Matthias to replace him. He did not mean to say that the psalm speaks only about Judas; but, as he says there, Judas was the guide and ringleader in the capture and execution of Christ. Christ Himself testified before Pilate that Judas had committed the greatest sin by delivering Him (John 19:11).

The psalm is chiefly a denunciation of Judas, but also of all those who take Judas’ part and continue to follow his lead. Christ Himself explains this here in the psalm when He says (v. 20): “May this be the reward of My accusers.” The psalm begins with Judas and then extends to everyone of Judas’ ilk, to all schismatics and persecutors of the Word of Christ; for they always slander the truth and persecute the genuine Christians. Against them this is a terrible psalm. It pronounces such curses and maledictions upon the enemies of Christ that some have made it a formula of imprecation for monks and nuns to pronounce against their enemies, and have said that if it is pronounced against anyone, he must die.²¹ But this is a falsehood and a fable.

Why does Christ pronounce such terrible curses when in Matt. 5:44 He prohibits cursing and He Himself did not curse on the cross, as St. Peter says (1 Peter 2:23), but prayed for those who cursed and slandered Him (Luke 23:34)? I asked the same question earlier with regard to vengeance.²² In brief, the answer is: Love does not curse or take vengeance, but faith does. To understand this, you must distinguish between God and man, between persons and issues. Where God and issues are involved, there is neither patience nor blessing but only zeal, wrath, vengeance, and cursing. When the wicked persecute the Gospel, for example, this strikes at God and at His cause. We are not to bless them or wish them luck when they do this. Otherwise no one could preach or write even against heresy, because that is impossible without cursing. Anyone who preaches against heresy wishes that it be destroyed and tries as hard as possible to destroy it.

These I would call “curses of faith.” Before faith would permit the Word of God to be destroyed and heresy to stand, it would prefer that all creatures be wiped out; for heresy deprives one of God Himself. The cursing of Christ in this psalm, then, is not on account of His person but on account of His office and His Word, because the error of the Jews is seeking to establish itself and to beat down the Gospel. He wishes that they be destroyed and have no success with their Judaizing, just as Moses prays in Num. 16:15 that God would not hear the prayer of Korah or respect their offering. Therefore it is necessary to curse, to wish evil, and to pray for vengeance against the persecution and perversion of the Gospel and against those who are guilty of it.

But the person should not avenge himself but should bear everything and even do good to his enemy, in accordance with the teaching of Christ and with the way of love. For here love is in charge, not faith;

I am under attack, not faith. In the same way a Christian may act as a judge and sentence a murderer to death, yet not on his own behalf or for his own ends but on behalf of others and by virtue of his office. Then it is the same as if God had done it, for His ordinance is doing it. In short, it is permissible to curse on account of the Word of God; but it is wrong to curse on your own account for personal vengeance or some other personal end.

In a curse on account of the Word of God it is correct to take the name of God and to curse by God, just as one swears and blesses by the name of God. Thus it is written in 2 Kings 2:24 that Elisha cursed the children of Bethel in the name of the Lord and the bears tore them up. In Zech. 3:2 the angel curses thus: "The Lord rebuke you, O Satan!" And in Acts 23:3 Paul curses thus: "God shall strike you, you whitewashed wall!" Now he speaks as follows:

1. Be not silent, O God of My praise!

Most of all He complains in this psalm about the mouths of the wicked, who always attack and condemn the teaching of God in order to gain a pretext for killing those who teach it. The whole issue in the conflict is this teaching; that is why I said that the curses in this psalm deal with faith and with the issues, not with love or with persons. That is also the meaning of the phrase "God of My praise"; it is as if He were saying: "Thou dost see that everybody is defaming, slandering, and condemning Me on account of Thy Word. But I have no one to praise Me except Thee and Thine. Therefore be not silent. Praise, laud, glorify, and defend Me. Prove that I am teaching correctly." Just as Christ says to the Father (John 17:1): "Glorify Me that Thy Son may glorify Thee. Grant Thy Spirit, do wonders and miracles, that My teaching may be vindicated. Then I shall glorify and proclaim Thee as true God and My Father. I shall be believed, and We shall both be glorified."

"God of My praise" sounds in both Latin and German as though I were praising God, but in Hebrew it is equivalent to saying: "God praises Me" or "I have no one to praise Me but God." In Ps. 89:26 "the God of my salvation" does not mean that I help God but that God helps me. And in Ps. 4:1 "God of my right" does not mean that I make God righteous or help Him to be just but that He helps me to be right and to preserve the right. Thus "God of My praise" here means that God is in charge of My praise, glorifying and honoring Me because I have to be obscured, slandered, and defamed on His account.

2. For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against Me, speaking against Me with lying tongues.

As has already been said, this means that they slander and defame Me terribly by claiming that My teaching, Thy Word, is error, which is heretical and seditious and must be condemned. Therefore be not silent, but praise Me in opposition to their scolding and slanders. Such must be the lot of all preachers of the Gospel.

3. They beset Me with words of hate, and attack Me without cause.

That is, their poison is broadcast, and it devours on every side, as gangrene²³ does. As Paul says (2 Tim. 3:13), they deceive many, discrediting Me and painting Me as an enemy in everyone's eyes, attacking Me without cause. I am teaching the truth; it would seem more reasonable for them to agree with Me and to take My side than to attack Me this way.

4. In return for My love they accuse Me, even as I make prayer for them.

"Without cause," I say, because I show My great love to them by telling them the truth. But in return for My love I have to take hate and hateful words and slander. What am I to do in such a case? I pray. Thus St. Paul also teaches in Phil. 4:6: "In everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God." As if he were saying: What is a person to do? They refuse to tolerate good deeds. Very well, one must commit it to God and continue praying. Oh, how pious the world is! It does not want evil, and it cannot tolerate good. What, then, does it want? Hell-fire and the devil! That's what it is asking for, and that's what it will get!

5. So they reward Me evil for good, and hatred for My love.

See how strikingly He addresses the Lord our God, and how powerfully He prays! They have no reason to fight against Me, He says. Thou knowest that I am teaching the truth; therefore they have even less cause to do Me harm. I am doing them nothing but good, and they hate Me for it. They hate and persecute both My correct teaching and My good works and miracles. What more can I do? What other conclusion is there than that they deserve to lose both My words and My works? Because they simply refuse to accept a blessing or anything good, they are accursed. There is no other way; for whoever refuses good must have evil, and whoever refuses to be blessed must be cursed, as we hear next:

6. Appoint wicked men over him; let Satan stand at his right hand.

Nowhere in all the Scriptures have I read a more horrible curse or a more terrible misfortune than that described in these two verses, which are enough in themselves to bring terror and dread to all who persecute and attack the Word of God.

He says here: “Appoint wicked men over them.” This “appoint” is *תָּקַף* in Hebrew, that is, “to install and ordain to an office,” as bishops, pastors, and preachers, or secular lords and officials, are appointed. The meaning here is this: They simply refuse to tolerate Me and My teaching. If this is the way they want it, then so let it be. Let only false teachers, schismatics, and godless preachers come among them, teaching them lies, godless doctrine, and error, and leading them from one error into another. This is what they want!

In addition, “let Satan stand at their right hand.” That is, let the devil so control them through his apostles that despite their desire to escape, their good intentions, and their efforts to do right and to know the truth the devil will be there disguising himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14) and restraining them. Let him so captivate them, so dazzle them and blind them with his fine appearance and lovely thoughts and words that they cannot escape, even though one were to present the truth to them so clearly and forthrightly that they could almost touch it.

We can see this punishment being visited nowadays on the Jews, who will not surrender their ideas even though they know that they have been refuted from the Scriptures. What makes them that way? Not human reason or human blindness, for this could be budged; but, as this verse says, Satan is standing at their right hand. That has always been the attitude of heretics; it is the attitude of our schismatics toward the Sacrament, as well as that of the papacy.

But He is speaking about one person rather than about many, although previously He was complaining about many. For this concerns primarily Judas, the betrayer, who, as we have said, was the ringleader in guiding the mob against Christ; but it also concerns all others of his ilk. When he refused to listen to Christ, he had to listen to the wicked high priests; and although he was sorry afterwards and acted as though he wanted to do right, he did not return to the right path but fell into despair. For Satan was standing directly at his right hand and holding on to him. Paul speaks of such punishment in 2 Thess. 2:11 when he says that God sends strong delusions upon those who did not accept the truth and insisted on believing lies. And Christ says in John 5:43: “I have come in My Father’s name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive.” This very thing is happening to us now in Germany, and it is going to get worse.

7. When he is tried, let him come forth guilty; let his prayer be counted as sin!

Oh, let the whole world be afraid and humble itself before the Word of God! How terrible this verse sounds! His entire life, it says, which he has conducted in as holy a way as possible, in the opinion that he was living as well as possible according to the Word of God—all this must be condemned and be accounted an unchristian and demonic life in the sight of God. What is the use now of his great and stringent ascetic life, of his fasting, castigation, and other fine works?

In addition, “when he prays to God,” as they do very vigorously, this is not only to be unheard but to be counted as sin. Through their prayer, therefore, they enter even greater condemnation, with which Christ, in Matt. 23:14, threatens the hypocrites who make long prayers.

The words “when he is tried” refer to the trial that takes place through teaching and preaching followed by works. In the preceding verse He spoke of the ministry of preaching. Therefore this trial is nothing else than the judgment or teaching in which evil is sentenced and condemned while the good life is proclaimed. So Ps. 122:5 describes the ministry of preaching in Jerusalem: “There thrones for judgment were set”; and Is. 9:7 and Jer. 23:5 both say that Christ is to rule with judgment and righteousness. In short, the judgment or trial is the teaching according to which consciences are to govern themselves and live, namely, that one should avoid evil and do good.

Now these wicked people are really in a bad way. They affirm justice and judgment; that is, they listen to preaching and advice and to the denunciation of evil, and they agree with it. Then they go and carry it out in their practice. But they do not realize that everything which they regard as precious and by which they intend to merit heaven is accursed! For the wicked have really established themselves in the government. They denounce evil and praise good; judgment and justice are on a firm foundation among

them, as in the Talmud of the Jews, in the canon law of us Christians, and in the Koran of the Turks. Yet it is all accursed and demonic!

8. May his days be few; may another take his office!

St. Peter quotes this verse in Acts 1:20 and says: "Let another take his bishopric"; he applies it to the replacement of Judas by Matthias. This application is correct, except that the Greek word ἐπίσκοπή and the word "bishopric" sound strange to us because we think of a type of bishops and bishoprics unknown to Judas and St. Peter. For ἐπίσκοπος or "bishop," strictly speaking, means nothing more than an official, and "bishopric" means an office. The word means the same as was said earlier (v. 6): "Appoint wicked men over them." It refers to an office and to officials; for they are to be Christ's officials and to carry out His command, that is, to preach and support preaching. How well the bishops are doing this now is obvious! Therefore they have lost their office, and others have replaced them, as Matthias replaced Judas; for they have become Judases.

What He wants to say is this: Judas and his people, the Jews, are really entitled to hold the apostolic office and to preach the Gospel, but they do not want to. Therefore Matthias replaces Judas, and the Gentiles replace the Jews, preaching the Gospel which they were to preach and which had been promised to them. Similarly, because the bishops do not preach and because they follow the pope, their Judas, others who are not bishops will come to take over their office and to preach.

When He says: "May his days be few," He means that he should not continue long. This was fulfilled even physically in the case of both Judas and the Jews; for Judas hanged himself soon after the betrayal, and the Jews were wiped out by the Romans soon thereafter. Now there follows a description of what will happen to the Jews, Judas' people. For as we have said, He is speaking in particular about the Jews, although what He says applies in general to all wicked teachers.

9. May his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow!

This is to happen to the women and children of the Jewish people, and it did when their men were killed by the Romans during the destruction of Jerusalem.

10. May his children wander about and beg; may they seek, because their habitation is in ruins!

He pronounces every spiritual and physical plague upon the Jews. We can see that since the time of their destruction they have been wanderers, driven out here and there, and having no place to settle down. Everywhere they must beg, not for bread but for a place to live in a country. They must seek a place to live everywhere; for their own place to live in Palestine was destroyed, and they have no land, city, town, or government of their own anywhere. This verse ought to cause the Jews to think, for they can see that this has happened to them and to no other nation under the sun. Every nation except the Jews has its own villages, cities, and country. But the Jews are everywhere and have nothing of their own anywhere, no country, no city, no villages. They are always insecure guests and beggars.

11. May the usurer seize all that he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil!

It would seem that the opposite of what this verse says ought to happen, for the Jews are notorious usurers and bleed everyone white. But the psalm means to say that they will have no good fortune, but only misfortune, in body and soul, in children, property, and honor. Great usurers though they are, an even greater usurer is to come along and take it all away from them, as the second part of the verse says: "May strangers plunder the fruits of his toil!" This is what happens to the Jews. When they have saved for a long time, disaster strikes; they are hounded, robbed, punished, and deprived of what they have. They know that this will happen, and they bemoan it daily.

12. Let there be none to extend kindness to him, nor any to pity his fatherless children!

My God, this is all too true! People regard the Jews as dogs, and anyone who can harm them or do them dirt supposes that he is doing a good deed. Because they and their children refuse to accept Christ, there is no mercy for these obdurate people. And yet they put up with it and cling to the vain hope for something better. So entrenched is Satan at their right hand!

13. May his posterity be cut off; may their name be blotted out in the second generation!

Here He returns to a consideration of many; He says "their name," not "his name," to show us that He is talking about an entire nation. All this was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem. Since that time there has never been a Jewish person who counted for much in Christendom and in the sight of God, except for the apostles. They were the last to have a name. Thus the memory and the name of the Jews have disappeared, although previously they had so many patriarchs and prophets whose names are not

forgotten even today and whose teaching and life are praised throughout the world. But since that time they have had none such, and thus within one man's memory their name and honor have been blotted out.

If this verse were taken to mean that they would all be blotted out physically and have no memory of anyone even among themselves, it would conflict with the preceding verses, which say that their descendants are to beg and suffer want; if that is so, they must have some descendants. But it means that in the judgment of God and of God's people they no longer count for anything, as their forefathers and prophets do. They are indeed waiting for a prophet who will count for something, but they will be disappointed. This verse says that they have been done for since the time of the apostles.

14. May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord, and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out!

By "his" He means those of the Jewish nation. The verse means that everyone in the world will have to say what St. Stephen says to the Jews in Acts 7:51: "You have always resisted the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you." For it is evident that just as the fathers and mothers of the Jews, that is, their ancestors, always were disobedient to the prophets, so their children are today. They refuse to believe the same prophets their fathers refused to believe; the unbelief is identical. If their fathers had believed, they would not have persecuted the prophets. If the Jews today believed those same prophets, they would accept Christ. But they remain in the sin of their fathers. Therefore God does not forget them and continues to punish them as long as they go on sinning.

I would like to know what the Jews could say about this psalm. They have to admit that the Scriptures are talking about them, as St. Paul says in Rom. 3:19. All the verses of this psalm force one to the conclusion that they are describing a man, whether David or someone else, who is suffering this among the Jews and cursing them. History supports this text, because for the past fifteen hundred years no nation under the sun has been as cursed as the Jews. This did not happen to the enemies of David; but it is happening to the enemies of Jesus Christ, the Jews, just as these words describe it. This is incontestable. As I have said, reason could perhaps be persuaded; but Satan is standing at its right hand and refusing to let it understand.

15. Let them be before the Lord continually; and may their memory be cut off from the earth!

That is, let the sin of their ancestors, which has been spoken of earlier, be before the Lord continually. For they refuse to give it up. Therefore God cannot hear their prayer or accept their works. This is why "they remain before the Lord continually." They always stir up their fathers' sin anew by the stubbornness of their hearts, and so they always remain accursed Jews, as He pictured them earlier.

In addition, "their memory is cut off even on earth." This does not mean that they will be unknown, but that they will not be referred to in sermons and narratives, as their patriarchs and prophets were. In this sense Ps. 16:4 says: "I will not remember them any more in My mouth." For in the Scriptures "memory" does not mean that a person is only remembered—otherwise Judas, Pilate, and Herod would always be in our memory—but that he is lauded and praised, and has a good reputation. This does not happen to Judas and the Jews; they have been reviled continually ever since they were destroyed by the Romans. All this is spoken in particular about the Jews; for they committed their sin against Christ Himself, and they also have children and descendants. But the heretics, the schismatics, and the papacy, who do not have children, still have their punishment; for they will finally be destroyed, and their memory will be cut off forever. This is happening to the papacy now, as has been said often enough elsewhere.

16. For he did not remember to show kindness, but pursued the poor and needy and the brokenhearted to their death.

Earlier, in the second of these psalms, we spoke of those who knock over a leaning wall or a tottering fence.²⁴ Here He explains and clarifies this. They are such scoundrels that when they ought to help and comfort and, as He says, "show kindness" to someone who is poor, needy, and troubled, they are most cruel to him and try to kill him. And then they claim that they are doing God a service by such a deed (John 16:2)!

In our own day, similarly, our wrathful princes and bishops and learned hypocrites let the Turks and their like alone, no matter what great heretics and deceivers they may be in their judgment. For the wall is too strong, and the fence will not budge. But let a poor citizen come along, or a miserable pastor or

preacher who has barely enough to eat and all sorts of troubles, and our great princes and wrathful bishops come down on him. He is the one who has to suffer. They have found a leaning wall and a tottering fence, and now they win their spurs on earth and gain heaven besides! A lion catches a mouse and acts as if he had slain a dragon! Nowadays Germany is full of nobles and knights who shout their curses in the taverns and wield their swords only against poor, needy, and defenseless people. And yet they belong to the nobility! A plague on those damnable men, those swine and savage beasts! We Germans are going the way of the world because we have no courage or truly noble thoughts.

Now, He says, God will not forget about them. He has taken note of their wickedness; and though the world may regard them as pious and respectable people, He considers them murderers and criminals. Here you see His accusations against them, and the names and actions He attributes to them. In the first place, they do not remember to show kindness to the poor and needy; that is, they are not kind even to the needy. Therefore they shall go to their destruction without kindness when they become poor and needy, so that the measure they gave will be the measure they get back (Luke 6:38).

In the second place, not only are they unkind, but they pursue the needy to their death. It is really an enormous sin to pursue and crush the needy, whom even wild beasts and irrational animals are willing to help. Yes, but who will believe that such is God's opinion of these men, and that they have this horrible sentence hanging over them and continually threatening them? To see this one needs spiritual eyes, until history catches up with these men, as it did with the Jews.

17. He loved to curse; let curses come on him! He did not like blessing; may it be far from him!

That is, he enjoyed cursing and malediction so much that he even cursed himself. Not that they overtly love cursing; but by these words the Holy Spirit indicates their horrible blindness and fearful obduracy, that they regard as a blessing what is the worst kind of curse and regard as a curse what is the most sublime blessing. Thus the Jews before Pilate cried out at Christ (Matt. 27:25): "His blood be on us and on our children!" I am of the opinion that this is a curse which is still bearing down hard on them. But they thought it was a wonderful blessing, saying to themselves: "Getting rid of this evildoer is a good deed in the sight of God. We are willing to take our chances with whatever threats may be involved, for we know that we shall obtain a blessing for it. So let His blood pour right over us!"

In the same way, they did not like blessing when they refused to have Him as king and said (John 19:15): "We have no king but Caesar." As if they were saying: "To the devil with this king! All He would bring us is curses and trouble!"

The papacy and its supporters are doing the same thing now. They have become hostile to the Gospel and have condemned it; they regard what threatens them as a blessing. Indeed, they say: "Let the devil have your Gospel, and may God shield me from your prayers! I will take my chances with your threats." Even if such people had no other trouble, don't you think it is trouble enough to have such a stubborn, blind, and obdurate heart that it neither sees nor hears and will not listen, but goes right ahead in the opinion that it is being blessed rather than cursed and rejects true blessing as though it were a curse? O Lord God, if we are to sin, let us commit some other sin than this!

18. He clothed himself with cursing as his coat, may it soak into his body like water, like oil into his bones!

Here He shows that this stubbornness is so deeply seated and firmly established in their hearts that they simply cannot be converted. It does no good to preach to them or admonish them, to threaten them, sing to them, or speak to them. He describes their condition with three illustrations. The first is a "shirt" or article of clothing. Just as a man cannot be without a shirt or something next to his skin—for he should not go naked—and must have his clothes on every day, so the Jews must wear the stubbornness that makes them love their curse. There is no way out, because they cannot be without this stubbornness. It is part of their everyday business, just as one wears everyday clothes. In addition, they suppose that it becomes them and that they are doing the right thing by wearing it, just as clothes become a man and he does the right thing by wearing them and would do wrong if he walked around naked and unclothed. Thus the Jews suppose that they would be doing something shameful if they were to take off their stubbornness.

In the second place, when a man drinks water or something else—for by "water" Hebrew means any drink and by "bread" any food—and digests it to the point that it has become part of his flesh and blood, how can it ever be extracted from him? No bath, sweat, or medicine will do so; it has become part of his

nature and, as the psalm says here, “it has soaked into his body.” There it must remain, to go with him, and he with it, into the eternal fire of hell. This is what has happened to the Jews. Their stubbornness has soaked into them so far that it has become their very nature, and they can never change. Still they suppose that it is a good thing, a real elixir and a fine drink to refresh them, quench their thirst, and nourish them. They drink it in great quantities every day and use it to stay alive, just as a person satisfies and cools, refreshes and sustains himself every day by drinking. For they love and enjoy hearing and teaching such curses, just as a thirsty man enjoys drinking. This, I believe, is what “loving to curse” means.

In the third place, he speaks here of “oil,” that is, of the good oil or balm with which one anoints oneself. For the oil from trees has the quality of being very beneficial to the body and making straight, strong, beautiful, and supple limbs. This is why boxers anoint their bodies with oil. Now when a man rubs oil or salve on himself to the point that it penetrates into bone and marrow, as good salves are able to do, how can it ever be extracted from him? It is hard enough to extract it from clothing. Washing and rinsing, twisting and wringing, do no good. One would have to melt down the bones and marrow along with the salve, and even then one would not get it out! In the same way the curse and stubbornness of the Jews has so penetrated their heart, mind, and thought, their bones and marrow, that they are beyond help. They must be melted down in hell, and even then they will not be purged or cleansed of it. Still they suppose that it is a precious ointment, and that their teaching is as beneficial to them as oil is to the body. They imagine that it makes them strong, healthy, handsome, lovely, and shiny in the sight of God, as oil makes the body in the sight of men. And so they smear it on more and more all the time.

We see this in our daily contacts with Jews. How stiff and stubborn they are from one generation to the next! They are incredibly venomous and spiteful in their language about Christ. What we believe and teach about Christ they regard as sheer poison and a curse. They suppose that Christ was nothing more than a criminal who, because of His crime, was crucified with other criminals. Whenever they mention Him, therefore, they refer to Him odiously as *Thola*, “the hanged one.”²⁵ For since they believe that Jesus was a criminal, it is inevitable that they should regard us Christians as the most foolish and filthy people under the sun. Their reason must tell them that if a murderer were beheaded today and then tomorrow some people came along, worshiped him, and looked upon him as true God, this would be much more foolish than worshiping a log or a stone. It would be the most foolish thing imaginable.

What makes it worse is that we Christians are also bad and set a bad example. Thus they are so confirmed in their offense that this curse has penetrated into their bones and marrow and has poisoned them until they cannot escape and come to regard the crucified Jesus as Lord and God. It is always ridiculous to them that we Christians worship a condemned Jewish criminal, as though we worshiped Cain or Absalom as gods. But there they are. The oil has soaked into their bones, and they go on soaking up the water. What a terrible judgment and illustration of divine wrath!

19. *May it be like a garment which he wraps round him, like a belt with which he daily girds himself!*

That is, let it happen to him as he wishes. Let the curse for which he is asking cling to him. Let him regard the Gospel as a poison and a curse, and Christ as a criminal. Let him be and remain so obdurate that God withdraws His hand and refuses to send His Spirit and Word among them for their conversion, as He threatens in Is. 5:6: “I will command the clouds that they rain no rain upon them.”

This does not mean that no Jew may ever come to faith again. Some crumbs must remain, and some individuals must be converted. But Judaism, as we call the Jewish nation, will not be converted. The Gospel, by which the Holy Spirit might find room among them, is not preached among them either. But where they gather in their synagogues, they keep their curse and poison; they curse Christ, regarding their poison as salvation and their curse as a blessing. Nevertheless, some will occasionally spring up individually from the group, so that God might still remain the God of the seed of Abraham and might not reject them altogether, as St. Paul says in Rom. 11:1–2.

You should note that He speaks here about the everyday “garment” and “belt,” not the garment that lies in the chest or the belt that lies in the cupboard but the one he puts on and wears every day. This is to signify the obdurate mind which they never lose and the confirmed curse with which they deal every day and which they never give up, supposing that it becomes them very well.

20. *May this be the reward of My accusers from the Lord, of those who speak evil against My soul!*

The prayer in this psalm is answered. This will happen to all the enemies of Christ, but especially to the Jews (whom He has particularly in mind), as the obvious course of events also shows. The real issue is their word or speaking, that they teach against Christ, curse, condemn, and blaspheme Him, and would like to see Him destroyed. This is meant by: “They speak evil against My soul,” that is, against My life. They would like to see Me dead and destroyed, so much do they hate Me. But the God of My praise is not silent. He praises and elevates Him even more when they curse and condemn Him.

Here we all might well have cause to fear, especially all heretics and false teachers. For what Christ asks here applies also to them. When a person commits the error of substituting his own opinion for Christ’s in even one item, everything is gone, and the whole Christ is lost, as He Himself says in Matt. 5:18–19: “Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be the least in heaven. For not an iota, not a dot, will pass away.”

Once such an opinion is set forth, men fall upon it; and it soaks like water into their body, like off into their bones and marrow, and it becomes their everyday garment. Then one side begins to anathematize the other, and each side regards the other side’s teaching as pure poison and a curse, but its own teaching as pure salvation and a blessing. We can see this happening now among our schismatics and papists. When this happens, everything is gone. The great mob is not converted. A few individuals, whom God elects, come back; but the rest remain in their curse and poison, as the Jews do, and treat it as something precious.

That is what this psalm means when it says that all the enemies of Christ love to curse and do not like blessing, and that they do not change. Therefore St. Paul also says in Titus 3:10–11 that one should have nothing to do with a factious man after admonishing him twice, for he is perverted. I have never read of false teachers and instigators of heresy being converted. They remain obdurate in their own opinions. The oil has soaked into their marrow and bone; the water has become flesh and blood, part of their nature. They will not listen or discuss. This is the sin against the Holy Spirit, which cannot be forgiven. It will not repent or be sorry, but will only defend and excuse itself, as though it were something holy and precious and as though the Gospel which opposes it were something demonic.

21. *But Thou, O God, My Lord, deal on My behalf for Thy name’s sake; because Thy steadfast love is good, deliver Me!*

Here He returns to God and prays that His cause may advance and prevail. Both are necessary—that the wicked ultimately lose, and that the righteous win. But He says that the cause belongs not to Him but to God Himself. It brings satisfaction and joy to a heart before God when it can pray for itself against the wicked in the assurance that our work and our suffering are on behalf of the Word and work of God, not on our own behalf. Therefore He says: “Deal on My behalf for Thy name’s sake. Thou dost see that the cause is Thine. I am praising Thy name, Thy Word, Thy honor. They are blaspheming all this. If Thou dost forsake Me, Thou dost forsake Thy name. But that is impossible.” Then what is God to do on His behalf? The steadfast love and kind deed of delivering Him, as He says: “Deliver Me!” For deliverance is sweet and pleasant to those who are caught in need and anxiety, as He says:

22. *For I am poor and needy, and My heart is stricken within Me.*

The meaning of this verse can be understood from the suffering of Christ. He was not only poor and needy outwardly, in His body, forsaken and persecuted by everyone, but also troubled and stricken inwardly. He had to hear all sorts of blasphemy and mockery, which are very painful to any pious Christian heart that loves the truth of God.

23. *I am gone, as a shadow flies at evening; I am shaken off like a locust.*

“To depart like a shadow” means to be unsettled, to travel hither and yon, as the wind drives the clouds, so that their shadow is never at one definite place of its own. Thus the life of all men is described in Job 14:1–2: “Man lives a few days. He flies like a shadow, and continues not.” Here to “fly” does not mean to fly as the birds do, but as David flew from his son Absalom (2 Sam. 15:14) and Jacob from his father-in-law Laban (Gen. 31:20); the Hebrew word is *פָּרַח*. This verse means: Man must pass away and go; he is driven and cannot abide. So Christ says here that during His life in the world the world cannot stand Him but hounds and pursues Him from one place to another until it runs Him down, as the wind pursues the clouds. The same thing happens to the Gospel; it finds no toleration anywhere, but the world huffs and blows until it drives the Gospel and its preachers away.

“To be shaken off like a locust” is the same thing. This phrase is obscure and difficult for us, because we do not know the animal called **לִקְצֹץ** and its ways. We call it a locust; it is not really a locust, but it resembles the locust or grasshopper. It is a common animal in the East. The Parthians and Moors eat it, as well as our own locusts and grasshoppers, just as the Italians eat frogs and snails. St. John the Baptist ate this same **לִקְצֹץ** as the evangelists tell us (Matt. 3:4). These little animals have no eyes but wave their wings a great deal; therefore they stay together and fly in a great swarm, though they have no king, as Solomon says in Prov. 30:27. Wherever they come down, they devour everything green. In those countries there is a law that three times a year manpower must be assembled to destroy them: once when they are laying their eggs, again when they have been hatched, and a third time when they have grown to maturity. When they come upon a country, it is a special plague from God, like hard times, pestilence, or war; Egypt, for example, was visited by such a plague (Ex. 10:12–19).

The plague can be smothered in two ways: one, which we just mentioned, is by weapons and manpower; the other is by a wind which God sends to pick them up and throw them into the nearest ocean or sea, as happened in Egypt. Thus Isaiah writes of the King of Assyria that they will be dispersed and pursued as the locusts are when one agitates them.²⁶ In the same way Nah. 3:15 says that the princes of Nineveh are to be dispersed and scattered like locusts. It is evident that the prophets used this image when they wanted to speak of a king or some other person being hounded and pursued, as we in our country would speak of the crows and jackdaws being chased out of their nests with their young and driven away.

Thus Christ wants to say here that He is pursued, scattered, dispersed, and shaken off like a locust. This happened when He was captured and His disciples forsook Him and were scattered. It still happens every day, and always has happened, that when a persecution of Christians and of the Word of God arises, there is a shaking-off, a hounding, and a scattering. Thus this verse could be a motto for Christ and for His Christians. This Hebrew word **נָנַץ** means “to shake out” or “to dust off,” as one shakes out or dusts off a coat; we also say: “I have dusted it off.” This is why hunting dogs are called “dusters,” because they spring the rabbits and other game and scatter them like dust. To be sprung and put to flight means to be like the dust which the wind scatters or like the rabbits and other game which the dogs, called “wind,” pursue. If Christ were to say: “I am scattered as wild game is scattered by dusters and winds,” this would be quite clear to us Germans.

24. My knees are weak through fasting; My body has become gaunt.

That is, they are full and sated, while I must suffer hunger and want. As St. Paul also says in 1 Cor. 4:11: “We hunger and thirst.” Undoubtedly Christ and His disciples were often in need of food; for He was poor, and the rich gave Him nothing. Thus He wants to say here: “Why are they pursuing Me when I am so poor and have neither money nor property? Indeed, they should give Me food before I starve. Not only do they not give Me food, but they even pursue Me.”

So it is in the world: the true preachers do not have bread enough to eat and must suffer need, trouble, and want. Meanwhile the deceivers have plenty; in fact, they control great principalities. Thus this verse remains true, that Christ must suffer hunger and want; for it means nothing else than that Christ and His followers do not get food in the world but are even pursued, as He will say on the Last Day (Matt. 25:42): “I was hungry and you gave Me no food.”

25. I was an object of scorn to My accusers; when they saw Me, they wagged their heads.

The preceding verse said that the world did not give Christ any food; this one says that it does not honor Him but mocks and despises Him. In other words, the world cannot grant Christ any possessions, honor, or life. He must bear poverty, need, and misery; He must know shame, mockery, and scoffing; He must suffer pain and death—He together with all who are His. He wants to say here: “Whatever I said or did was an object of scorn. They would wrinkle their noses, wag their heads, and make mouths at it (Ps. 22:7). It was foolish and meaningless to them. What more was I to do? I did them every good, and they do Me every evil. (As He says earlier [v. 5]: ‘They reward Me evil for good.’) I suffer every evil and cruelty at their hands, and yet they refuse what I have to offer. Very well for them; so let it be! They have no excuse. I have done more than enough for them!”

26. Help Me, O Lord My God! Save Me according to Thy steadfast love!

He closes the psalm with the petition that God be with Him and make the wickedness of the Jews and of all His enemies evident, together with His righteousness, so that they may come to naught and He may be vindicated. And God is to do all this “according to His steadfast love.” Previously He has shown the curses and evil being directed against Him by their obdurate and insane hearts. Now He asks that through the judgment of God this may become evident before the whole world, so that they may be deprived also of the fine outward appearance which they still have, be put to shame before the whole world, and thus be caught in both their sin and their shame, as we see happening now to the poor Jews.

27. *Let them know that this is Thy hand; Thou, O Lord, hast done it!*

Although they refuse to see that what Thou art doing to Me and to them is Thy work, let it become evident to the whole world, and let everyone say: “Of course, this is the work of God, that the Jews are defeated and on the decline, while Christ is soaring and increasing. Human powers could not have accomplished this.”

28. *Let them curse, but do Thou bless! If they arise, let them be put to shame; but let Thy servant be glad!*

“Do not let their curses on Me and Mine accomplish anything; but the more they curse, the more do Thou bless. And if they arise against Me, let that be put to shame soon.” It seems to me that the Jews ought to be very familiar with this verse! My God, how often in various countries have they started something against Christ, only to be burned at the stake, killed, and hounded for it! It never fails. When they arise, they are put to shame, burned at the stake, or driven out. But Christ and His own remain joyous in God, for this confirms them in their faith.

29. *May My accusers be clothed with dishonor; may they be wrapped in their own shame as in a mantle!*

He returns now to the earlier analogy of the garment and the daily putting-on of the curse. Here He is speaking about the public shame before the world which comes from the curse. It is as if He were saying: “Just as they put the curse on their spirit as though it were an everyday article of clothing, so let them wear a garment of shame outwardly too. Thus they will be recognized by the entire world as My enemies and will be despised. Sin and shame will be their two everyday garments—sin before God and shame before the world.” Here He explicitly mentions the *מְעִיל*, the long coat which reaches to one’s feet, as though He wanted to indicate that they have nothing but shame from head to toe.

30. *With My mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord; I will praise Him in the midst of the throng.*

That is, by this judgment and deed Thou wilt cause men to love and praise Thee from the heart as a God who is like a father in taking the side of the poor, not letting them go down to defeat, and frustrating the boasts of the wicked. We would say it this way: O Lord God, who would not praise and laud Thee before the whole world and everywhere for helping the poor so graciously and for toppling and punishing the proud and haughty tyrants so mightily? Or, as it continues:

31. *For He stands at the right hand of the needy, to save him from those who condemn him to death.*

May God be praised forever and every day for taking the side of the poor and lowly instead of exalting the bigwigs and haughty tyrants, as they suppose that He will! He saves; yes indeed, He saves not only from occasional needs but also from those who condemn Him to death, judge and sentence Him as a heretic and a deceiver. For here this word “condemn” refers to those who occupy an office and condemn; in other words, to the secular government.

Let us be sure, then, that the secular government will never be completely Christian, but that the vast majority will always persecute Christ, His Word, and those who are His. As Ps. 2:1–2 says, “Why do the Gentiles conspire, and the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and His Anointed?” Here you see that it is the virtue of kings and rulers to do battle against God and Christ; and this is what they do. But it happens to them that they waver and are put down from their thrones (Luke 1:52), one after another, as that same psalm and other psalms tell us.

1

1Luther, M. (1999, c1958). *Vol. 14: Luther's works, vol. 14 : Selected Psalms III* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Ps,37.1-109.31). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

PSALMS 1 AND 2 FROM WORKS ON THE FIRST TWENTY-TWO PSALMS, 1519 TO 1521

A Composite Translation

PREFACE JESUS

To the Most Illustrious Prince and Lord, Frederick, Grand Marshal and Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, Duke of Saxony, Margrave of Meissen, Landgrave of Thuringia, and his Most Generous Patron, Brother Martin Luther sends greetings in the Lord.

THOSE who dedicate and inscribe their learned books and the products of their intellect to great men seem to be doing something wise and proper. By this device they provide their works with authority as well as with protection against an evil fate that is particularly hostile to them. For it is characteristic of human works that the better they are, the more they are subject to the envy and carping of those who wish them ill. This is why literature and everything else that depends on understanding and learning—since it is undoubtedly very good and worthy of a man's very best and most special attention—needs a Maecenas or an Augustus as well as a Ulysses to strike these Thersiteses with his eleven-branched staff.¹ Some have another motive for their dedications: they want to celebrate and immortalize the names of those to whom they inscribe their books as a means of pointing to an example of the virtue they are praising and thus of arousing the same virtue in their descendants. Still others are motivated by a desire to express thanks and somehow to requite a kindness, giving concrete proof of their gratitude to those from whom they have received the kindness.

But I, Most Illustrious Prince, am motivated by none of these reasons. I know very well that what I manage to achieve is not the sort of work that merits a patron, and at least I am fortunate in being aware of my own ineptitude. But even if I were able to achieve something worth dedicating, I would not be anxious to preserve it by dedicating it to a patron. I have learned from the Holy Scriptures what a terrible and dangerous thing it is to sound forth and to speak in the church of God, in the presence of those of whom you know that they will be your judges on Judgment Day. (I am not as afraid of those who insult me at present.) But to speak in the presence of God, who sees everything, with the angels looking on and with all the creatures watching and listening and paying attention to the Word of God! (For it is correct to believe that everything reveres the Word of God, through which it was created, except for man and the devil, who became deaf through their ingratitude.) When I learned all this, there was nothing I wanted more than to keep silence and to expunge everything I had poured out previously. It is difficult and awesome to have to give account to God for every idle word! Nothing is keeping me in the ministry of the Word except my obedience to the will of another, namely, the will of God. Of my own free will I would never have gone into it or remained in it, so great is my awe!

In the second place, what fame, praise, or immortality could the name of Your Lordship hope to gain from me? You are a prince who, in addition to possessing the other princely gifts, has acquired such a glorious reputation for your love of scholarship and of scholars that not even Appion could immortalize your name; but you would immortalize his name and that of anyone else who might celebrate you.² Who does not know that in sponsoring scholarship Frederick has set an example to all the other princes? Greek and Hebrew are thriving quite well at your Wittenberg.³ The teaching of the liberal arts is enjoying better fortune than it used to. The pure theology of Christ is triumphing over the opinions and questions of men, which count for hardly anything at all. All this is prospering under your auspices, with your support, and under your protection. If only the big men of the church, who ought to set an example for lay princes in these matters, were at least following the example of the laymen! But the church has become too rich and powerful.

Then, too, how could I adequately thank you for the very generous favors with which you have endowed an undeserving man? It was at your expense that my insane head was adorned with a decoration which compels me to appear in public even though I am ashamed to do so.⁴ Still I have to wear it, at the behest of those whom I am obliged to obey. But, Your Lordship, what cares, troubles, expenses, and even dangers have come upon you as a result of the spectacle I have caused regarding indulgences! Your whole realm knows that my prince has been more solicitous for me than I have been for myself. I was willing to take a chance, and I threw the dice. I was always ready to wager and to await the worst. I was hoping that this would provide the occasion for relieving me of my teaching responsibilities, so that I could find a corner somewhere away from the public attention which I hate. Yet your support of me persisted, My Lord; and though I wanted to suffer what my opponents earnestly wished to inflict on me, neither of us got his wish.

But though the end is not yet, I am pleased meanwhile that it has taken this turn, especially because it must be a shock to any Christian to find some people in the church of Christ so shameless that in the name of the venerable power of the church they presume to advance their own shameful desires. And the more generous, good, or learned one of the popes is, the greater are the atrocities which these wicked impostors allow themselves to commit under his aegis. How many obvious lies they have told about this one petty issue in order to terrify a single little friar and establish their tyrannies, profaning and besmirching the sacred name of Leo X!⁵ It is also despicable that there are people who prostitute the name of the supreme pontiff and take it in vain. Their ancestors, the false prophets, false apostles, and false Christs, all did the same thing; they even forced the holy name of God and of Christ to serve their lies. Thus it is by a special dispensation of God that the pure honor of the Roman Church and the reverence for the supreme pontiff have been preserved. But at least the sycophants have been beautifully and successfully set down, to teach them somehow that God, who laughs at the scoffers, is still living and reigning. May this God, I say, and our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom alone belongs everything that we admire in you, Most Illustrious Prince, watch over it, increase it, and preserve it eternally. Thus I am bringing you this prayer instead of an act of thanksgiving, since I am incapable of anything else.

If I want to publish these works of mine under the name of Your Illustrious Lordship—no matter what they may be like, “works” they certainly are; I do not dare call them “interpretations” or “commentaries,” for I am very conscious of their shortcomings⁶—it is for no other motive than my love. I have experienced how purely and chastely your heart loves the Holy Scriptures; and, to use the words of Deborah (Judg. 5:9), my heart goes out to such princes. And why should I not express what I think, the basis for the love I have, so that those who boast of the title “Doctor of the Holy Scriptures” might see the difference between a hypocrite and a real theologian? My good and reverend father in Christ, John Staupitz, once told me this story:⁷ During a conversation in Your Lordship’s presence the subject of public speakers came up. With your remarkably keen discernment you said that those addresses which are based on the arguments and traditions of men are extremely cold, unconvincing, and weak; for nothing can be adduced that is so keen that it cannot be refuted by other arguments. Only the Sacred Scriptures have such a majestic and powerful tone, even without our effort, that they can meet and dispose of all the debating tricks and compel one to say (John 7:46; Matt. 7:29): “No man ever spoke like this man! He teaches as one who has authority, not as the scribes and Pharisees!” When Staupitz heartily applauded and praised this sentiment, you stretched out your hand to him and asked for his in return; and you said: “Please promise me that you will always feel this way!”

I ask you, is this not a statement and sentiment that would do honor even to the most holy supreme pontiff, especially since it was obviously expressed not only with your voice but with your heart? What? Is it not yet evident who the real theologians are? Shame on the theologians and the jurists, particularly those to whom the Sacred Scriptures are almost a joke! By stringing out their endless glosses they try to make an impression on those who want whatever they say to be regarded as the Word of God (as St. Jerome also complains), as though Christ had said to Peter: “Command, order, teach” rather than (John 21:17): “Feed My sheep”! This means: Bring out that by which they are fed. And they are fed only by the Word of God, not by the opinions and traditions of men. In addition, what you so truly said—that no argument is so keen that it cannot be refuted—is abundantly substantiated by the miserable treadmill in which the Scotists, Thomists, Albertists, modernists, and all the sects into which these are subdivided waste their time.⁸ I must admit, Most Illustrious Prince, that this delightful story made me love you very

much. I do not know why; but I cannot help loving those about whom I hear that they love the Holy Scriptures, and hating those who distort and despise them—so much so that toward both I am too violent, as love tends to be, and, as those friends of mine accuse me, caustic and vainglorious. But let them accuse me all they please. They may impose bad names or good names on me of the first or second or third intention—I mean imposition; I do not want to commit anything against their dialectic!⁹ But they will never take theology itself away from me or extinguish my love for it, as long as Christ remains gracious to me. I know what scholastic theology did for me, and I know how much I owe it! I am glad that I have escaped from it, and for this I thank Christ my Lord. They do not have to teach it to me, for I already know it. Nor do they have to bring it any closer to me, for I do not want it!

So please grant permission to this love of mine, Most Illustrious Prince, to publish this book under Your Lordship's name. At the urging and insistence of my fine students I am expounding the Psalter for the second time in your Wittenberg,¹⁰ and I cannot deny that I owe them much. As I expound it, I do not want anyone to suppose that I shall accomplish what none of the most holy and learned theologians have ever accomplished before, namely, to understand and teach the correct meaning of the Psalter in all particulars. It is enough to have understood some of the psalms, and those only in part. The Spirit reserves much for Himself, so that we may always remain His pupils. There is much that He reveals only to lure us on, much that He gives only to stir us up. And, as Augustine has put it so clearly, if no human being has ever spoken in such a way that everyone understood him in all particulars, how much more is it true that the Holy Spirit alone has an understanding of all His own words! Therefore I must openly admit that I do not know whether I have the accurate interpretation of the psalms or not, though I do not doubt that the one I set forth is an orthodox one. For everything that blessed Augustine, Jerome, Athanasius, Hilary, Cassiodorus, and others assembled in their expositions of the Psalter was also quite orthodox, but very far removed from the literal sense.¹¹ For that matter, this second exposition of mine is vastly different from the first. There is no book in the Bible to which I have devoted as much labor as to the Psalter.

I have now come to the conclusion that as long as someone else's interpretation is pious, one should not reject it unless he wants his own to be rejected in turn, according to "the law of the fang."¹² One falls short in some ways, another in more ways. I see some things that blessed Augustine did not see; on the other hand, I know that others will see many things that I do not see. What recourse do we have but to be of mutual help to one another and to forgive those who fall, since we ourselves have already fallen or are about to fall? Otherwise we shall be adjudged as members of that wicked and corrupt class of men who cannot do anything worthwhile themselves but celebrate Pompeian triumphs if they can catch some more illustrious person in a trivial mistake. I know that a person would be guilty of the most shameless boldness if he dared claim that he had understood even one book of the Scriptures in all its parts. In fact, who would even dare assert that anyone had completely understood one single psalm? Our life is one of beginning and of growth, not one of consummation. That person is better who has come closer to the Spirit. If I have reached the moon, I must not immediately suppose that I have reached the sun as well; nor should I then despise the lesser stars. There are degrees of living and of working; then why not of understanding? The apostle says (2 Cor. 3:18) that we are being changed from one degree of clarity to another. To speak of the matter at hand, then, I am serving only those who do not know any of this and would like to. At least it will serve the purpose of occupying me and my students with better subject matter than if I were to create new darkneses and frogs and flies by expounding the *Sentences*!¹³

There is, in my opinion, one difference of content between this book of the Bible and the others. In the other books we are taught by both precept and example what we ought to do. This book not only teaches but also gives the means and method by which we may keep the precept and follow the example. For it is not by our striving that we fulfill the Law of God or imitate Christ. But we are to pray and wish that we may fulfill it and imitate Him; when we do, we are to praise and give thanks. And what is the Psalter but prayer and praise to God, that is, a book of hymns?

When the blessed Spirit of God, the Father of orphans and the Teacher of the ignorant, sees that we do not know what to pray for or, how to pray, as the apostle says (Rom. 8:26), He helps us in our weaknesses. As a teacher will compose letters or little speeches for his pupils to write to their parents, so by this book He prepares both the language and the mood in which we should address the Heavenly Father and pray for that which the other books have taught us to do and to imitate. Thus man need not

lack anything he needs for his salvation. Such is the care and kindness we receive from God, who is blessed forever! In Him may your Most Gracious Lordship live and prosper now and forever. Amen.

In Wittenberg, the sixth day before the calends of April, in the year of our Lord 1519.¹⁴

PSALM • 1

1. *Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly.*

THE search for personal blessedness is common to all men. There is no one who does not desire to fare well or hate to fare badly. And yet all men, whoever they are, have strayed from the knowledge of true blessedness, most of all those who have made a special search for it, such as the philosophers, the best of whom have identified it with virtue or virtuous works. Thus they have made themselves more miserable than others and have robbed themselves equally of the blessings of this life and the next; for although the common people are grossly out of their mind to strive for blessedness in the pleasures of the flesh, they at least have partaken of the good things of this life. However, the psalmist, speaking from heaven, rejects the efforts of all men and gives a unique definition of blessedness which is unknown to everyone: Blessed is he who loves the Law of God. This is a short definition; but it is one which contradicts all human reason, particularly that of the wise. But first let us consider matters that are grammatical and yet theological.

The Hebrew speaks in the plural, בְּרָכָה, “blessed people” or “blessed things.” Thus: Blessed are the affairs of man who does not stray; as if he wanted to say: All things go well with that man who, etc. Why do you argue? Why do you draw empty conclusions? This is that unique pearl; and if a man can find it by loving the Law of God and being separate from the ungodly, all his affairs are in excellent shape. But if he does not make this discovery, he will search in vain for all good things. For just as to the pure all things are pure (Titus 1:5), so to those who love all things are lovely, and to the good all things are good. In general: As you are, so God is to you, to say nothing of creatures. Since God is pure to the pure, perverse to the perverse, and holy to the holy, there is nothing good to him who is evil and nothing pleasant to him to whom the Law of God is unpleasant.

“Man” is used in the Scriptures in a threefold way. It signifies age, sex, or humanity. It is used for age in 1 Cor. 13:11: “When I became a man, I gave up childish ways”; for sex in Matt. 1:16: “Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary,” and in John 4:16: “Go, call your husband”; and for humanity in I Sam. 26:15: “And David said to Abner, ‘Are you not a man?’”¹⁵ And in this third sense man is called blessed here, so that the female sex is not excluded from the blessing.

“He has departed” or better, the Hebrew לֹא הִלֵּךְ, “he has not walked, not entered, not approached,” which the Greek renders as οὐκ ἐπopeύθη. It is well known that in the manner of the Scriptures “to walk” and “to approach” are figures of speech, meaning “to live” or “to associate,” as in Ps. 15:2: “He who walks blamelessly,” and in Ps. 101:6: “He who walks in the way that is blameless shall minister unto me.” Similarly in Rom. 8:1, 4: “There is no condemnation for those who walk not according to the flesh.”

Here “counsel” is undoubtedly used in place of “principles,” or “doctrines,” since no human association exists unless it is constructed and maintained according to certain principles and laws. With this word the psalmist rebukes the pride and the corrupt arrogance of the ungodly. For first of all they disdain to walk in the Law of the Lord but follow their own counsel. And then he calls it a counsel, which sounds like wisdom and the right way and thus would be free from error. For this is the corruption of the ungodly, that in their own eyes they are wise, and that among themselves they disguise their errors with the appearance of wisdom and the right way. For if they attacked men with manifest error, it would not be a great praise of blessedness not to walk with them. For he does not say: “in the foolishness of the wicked” or “in the error of sinners.” Therefore he warns us most earnestly to beware of the appearance of goodness, so that the satanic angel, disguised as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14), does not seduce us by his cunning. But the counsel of the wicked is placed in contrast to the Law of the Lord, so that we learn to beware of the wolves in sheep’s clothing. They are quick to counsel everyone, to teach everyone, to help everyone, whereas there is nothing of which they are less capable.

The “ungodly,” which the Hebrew terms **עוֹרֵף**, was rightly interpreted by St. Hilary as one having evil feelings about God.¹⁶ For ungodliness is, strictly speaking, the crime of unbelief and is committed in the heart. But it is expressed capriciously and in various ways. Thus you must always have these two opposites in mind: faith in God and godlessness, just as the Law of God and the counsel of man. For when we deal with piety and impiety, we are dealing, not with behavior but with attitudes, that is, with the source of the behavior. Thus whoever rightly believes in God can do nothing but good and lead a good life. And even though the righteous falls seven times a day, he will rise again just as often (Prov. 24:16). But the wicked fall into evil and do not rise again. Because they are unbelievers, they do no good works at all. Everything they do has a beautiful cast, but it is the shadow of Behemoth (Job 40:15), with which they deceive themselves and attract the simple. Therefore he is godly who lives by faith, and he is ungodly who lives in unbelief.

Now we are able to see the sinner. This is the outward way of the wicked, for you cannot see counsel or the wicked man concealed in the heart. Therefore he speaks of the works, the conduct, and the endeavors in which they are outwardly active, and he calls this their way, so that counsel appears in application and, as the saying goes, in practice; and the evil which they think inwardly they do outwardly. Truly this way, as I have said, is always much more pleasing in appearance than the way of the godly. For anyone can easily avoid crude sinners without this guide, or at least recognize them.

“Has stood” means stubbornness, a stiff neck, in which the proud excuse themselves with words of malice; for they have become incorrigible in their godlessness, since they consider it piety. For “to stand” means, in Scriptural metaphor, “to be steadfast,” as in Rom. 14:4: “It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand.”¹⁷ Therefore the Hebrew word for column, like the Latin word for statue, comes from the concept of standing. For this is the fixation of the ungodly, that to themselves they seem to live a righteous life and shine before others with their beautiful works.

“Seat,” “to sit in the seat,” is to instruct, to be a master or teacher. For example, in Matt. 23:2: “The scribes sit on Moses’ seat,” etc. Thus to sit on a throne is to reign or be a king, just as it frequently appears in the Books of Kings; “to sit on a seat of state” is to be a ruler, and “to sit on a bench” is to be a judge.

Although “pestilence” is not a literal translation, it is a very adequate expression; for the Hebrew refers to mockers or to the scornful. Now they are the scornful whom he accuses throughout the Psalter as the deceitful and the deceitful tongue, as those who, under the appearance of sound doctrine, administer the poison of their false teaching. And no bodily pestilence is as contagious for the body as the teaching of godlessness is for the soul. In the words of the apostle (2 Tim. 2:17): “And their talk will eat its way like gangrene.” But just as the wise are called the soundness of the world (Wisd. of Sol. 6:26), so the ungodly are justly called the pestilence of the world. Indeed, what more pernicious deceit is there than to give a deadly poison to souls hungry for pure truth?

In accordance with universal use in the church, therefore—which distinguishes the good life as to faith and morals, the former determining godly and ungodly, and the latter sinners and saints—the psalmist here describes two states. And to them he adds a third. For since ungodliness had no other goal after it had infected man inwardly in his attitude and outwardly in his behavior, it burst forth to drag others along into the same perdition. It was not content with its own ungodly attitude and wicked conduct unless it taught ungodliness also to others. So much for the grammar.

This is to be especially noted about Scripture, how prudently it refrains from mentioning sects and persons. For without a doubt this psalm deals primarily with the Jewish people, as the apostle says, “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16), and Rom. 3:19: “Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law.” Yet it does not say: “Blessed are the Jews, or blessed is this one or that one.” Neither does it say “in the counsel of this or that people,” but absolutely: “Blessed is the man ... the counsel of the ungodly ... the way of the sinners ... the seat of the scornful,” etc., whoever these may be; for there is no respect of persons with God (Gal. 2:6).

And this was most necessary so that the Word of God, because it is eternal, should apply to all men of all times. For although in the course of time customs, people, places, and usages may vary, godliness and ungodliness remain the same through all the ages. Thus we see the prophets opposed to the false prophets, apostles against the pseudoapostles, church fathers against the heretics, all using the same

Scriptures; yet neither the prophets nor the apostles nor the doctors nor their adversaries are named, but only the terms “godly” and “ungodly” appear.

Furthermore, this is done so that, if the name of a person were added, others should not imagine that what is called evil does not apply to them, or that what is called good applies to them alone. Thus the Jews referred to themselves whatever blessing was promised to the seed of Abraham and Israel, while, as I have said, this psalm was certainly directed first against them. Therefore we, too, like the holy fathers, apply the psalm to that generation which is contemporaneous with us. In fact, we should rather follow as the psalmist leads; for he reproves all the wicked. Not that he is forced into that pattern, but we find him doing this.

Therefore the psalmist says: “Blessed is the man who does not go astray,” that is, when so many thousands of the ungodly are about us that it is possible to say (Ps. 12:1): “Help, Lord, for there is no longer any that is godly; for the faithful have vanished from among the sons of men.” And also With Micah 7:2: “The godly man has perished from the earth, and there is none upright among men.” Is not he blessed and truly a man strong in faith who does not walk with the great throng on the broad way, who suffers much abuse and evil and still does not consent to walk with them, and who is not deceived by the attractive counsel of the ungodly which would lead even the elect astray (Matt. 24:24)? It is a great thing when a man is not overcome by riches, pleasures, and honors; but it is an even greater victory when a man overcomes the reasoning and the glittering righteousness of the ungodly, by which pure faith is attacked most of all.

However, it should be noted that the words of the psalm are words of faith, that they do not speak of men according to what one sees on the outside. For then (as I have said) no one would consider them ungodly. The prophet speaks in the spirit, where also that is godless (because it is empty of faith) which among men is the holiest of all. Thus Eccl. 8:10: “Then I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of the holy place and were, praised in the city where they had done such things.” And Ps. 37:35: “I have seen a wicked man overbearing, and towering like a cedar of Lebanon.” These are terrible things, for who would look for ungodliness there, and so deeply?

But listen! This psalm does not reproach merely the ungodly and the sinners, for every man apart from Christ is ungodly and a sinner, but mainly those who are double sinners. They not only fail to recognize themselves as ungodly but, besides this, devise a counsel in which they might move and give their wickedness a bright coloring. Therefore he does not say: Blessed is he who does not walk as an ungodly man or stand as a sinner, but: Who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly and in the way of the sinners. For they are not satisfied with being ungodly, but they also want to be righteous and holy by giving their ungodliness the appearance of godliness.

Now whom do you think this means in our time? I would not dare name such persons, lest I draw upon myself the implacable enmity of certain priests, monks, and bishops. For the generations of the ungodly have always been most intolerant of the Word of God and have filled heaven with martyrs for no other reason than that they maintained that by it they were doing God a service (John 16:2). They looked on themselves as fighting for the godly when they stubbornly accused the truly pious of ungodliness.

Yet you should know and not doubt that they are hit who shine only in ceremonies, rituals, and all manner of other displays of godliness, including clothes, food, places, and occasions. Or, at best, they measure godliness by works and prayers. This is especially true of those who through their rules, privileges, merits, doings, and regulations divide themselves in implacable discord. And they would do or suffer anything rather than give in to one another and humble themselves in mutual love. That these are the ungodly you can see from this, that they are confidently secure in their lives and do not have the fear of God before their eyes. For this should be a perpetual and infallible canon to you, and (as the saying goes) more certain than a touchstone.¹⁸ That is characteristic of the ungodly, not to fear God and, sure of His mercy (as they think), to take everything for granted. The godly, however, like Job, fear for all their works. They trust in no righteousness of theirs and consider their sanctity as dung. Nor can they contend for it, to justify or vindicate themselves; but they consider themselves worthy of all hatred and vengeance. Thus I have said that the eye and the ear of faith are necessary in order to hear these words of the Spirit and to see what is revealed. For man is not able to comprehend it.

However, do not think that it is ceremonies or good works that I condemn, but the conjecture, the self-reliance, and the works of these people. I call them a pestilence, because we see what happens to them, how they fall into sects, anger, slander, and boundless monstrosities of the wicked. These they all gloss over in the name of piety, the veil of their own counsel and the gutter of their dogmas. Yet if they did their work in humility, it would surely be good.

Nor stand in the way of sinners.

After the ungodly violate the faith, what remains except that their works are sinful and evil? And how, you will say, are the works of the Jews, the heretics, and the arrogant evil? They fast, pray, do good, and otherwise do that which no man is heard to call evil. But I tell you that faith is necessary. The works of the ungodly are so much worse because they confirm ungodliness and make the wicked strong and persistent in the way of the sinner. Moreover, they are sins because they proceed from an impure heart. The sage asks (Ecclus. 34:4): "How can a liar speak the truth? And how can a good thing come from one who is evil?"

However, Christ Himself instructed us beautifully when He said (Matt. 7:20): "By their fruits you shall know them." For they have twofold works. There is one side which He calls sheep's clothing. Yet these are not their genuine fruits but are assumed according to their counsel and ways. But when you touch and confront them, behold, their real fruits burst forth: anger, bravado, uproar, pride, slander, curses, excuses, envy, blasphemy, and similar monstrous things. For from these thornbushes you can get no fruits other than sharp thorns. Such people, as you see, are also ceremonial work saints.

Nor sit in the seat of the scornful.

This is what the Jews do, who have abandoned Christ. Under their lips is the deadly venom of vipers (Ps. 140:3), and their wine is the poison of serpents (Deut. 32:33). Therefore they must teach contrary to Christ, for they do not teach Christ. These are they whom the heretics follow, under another name and person, of course; but they cause destruction by the same ungodliness. And, to come now to our own times, those occupy the "seat of the scornful" who fill the church of Christ with the opinions of the philosophers, the traditions of men, and the counsel of their own minds, and oppress poor souls. They neglect the Word of God, through which alone the soul is fed, lives, and is sustained.

Thus it is that men know no other righteousness than that which is provided by works, but this is ungodly and sinful in the presence of God. For it is impossible to teach the works of any kind of laws without peril unless one first teaches faith in Christ as the better part of doctrine and with greater zeal. Paul uses eleven chapters of the Epistle to the Romans to make faith the foundation, and then five to build life on this foundation. Again, in the Epistle to the Galatians he spends five chapters on faith and only one, the sixth, on life. He does likewise in other epistles. In the Gospel Christ demands only faith.

2. But his delight is in the Law of the Lord, and on His Law he meditates day and night.

A grammatical and theological exposition.

Once and for all I say: See that you always separate most widely and distantly the Law of the Lord from the laws of any men, and watch with all diligence that the two, confused in one chaos (as is done by the doctors of destruction), do not miserably destroy you. They either turn the Law of God into human tradition or human tradition into the Law of God. Let us illustrate this by examples. God's Law says: "Honor father and mother." From this Law the Pharisees have made the following tradition: "The sacrifice offered on the altar is better than what is given to parents," as you read in Matt. 15:5. On the other hand, while they hold the true commandment of God in such contempt, they honor Him with another commandment of their own. Out of their own law they make a Law of God: "Wash your hands when you go to eat." Thus the elders declared, and when one does not listen to the elders, it is the same as when one does not listen to God. Therefore Christ says in the same place (Matt. 15:7-9): "You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me; in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men!'" Thus in our time this has become prevalent, that they boldly declare that only the voice of the pope and the Roman curia are to be heard with fear and trembling, while the commandments of God are even mocked, to say nothing of being despised. And no one does this more than they who so highly exalt the curia. Indeed, they have brought their ungodly superstitions to such lengths that there are priests everywhere who hold it to be a mortal sin if one celebrates Mass without stole or maniple or any other such details. If they should make a mistake in the Canon of the Mass, even involuntarily, it is the greatest crime. However, I am ashamed

to relate other ridiculous and stupid terrors of conscience among priests and monks, since they do not once realize that they have wasted many years in lewdness, anger, envy, greed, and pride, and thus have scorned God.

Here “delight” stands, first of all, neither for ability nor for the indolent habit which was introduced from Aristotle by the new theologians in order to subvert the understanding of the Scriptures, nor for the action out of which, as they say, that ability or habit proceeds.¹⁹ All human nature does not have this delight, but it must necessarily come from heaven. For human nature is intent and inclined to evil, as the divine authority says (Gen. 8:21). The Law of the Lord is truly good, holy, and just. Then it follows that the desire of man is the opposite of the Law, even hates it and flees from it. When now and then a man out of fear of punishment or desire for its promise pretends to love the Law, there nevertheless remains an inward hatred of the Law. He cannot love it freely, and he loves the Law, not because it is good but because it serves his ends.

Moreover, this desire is the pure desire of the heart, and that pleasure does not ask what the Law promises or threatens but only that the Law is holy, just, and good. Therefore it is not only the love of the Law but also a loving delight in the Law which the world and the prince of the world can destroy and defeat neither by prosperity nor by adversity. Yet through need, ignominy, the cross, death, and hell this “desire” breaks through to victory, and in adversity it is the most conspicuous.

Moreover, this desire comes from faith in God through Jesus Christ. On the other hand, a desire which has been extorted through fear of punishment is servile and impetuous, while that which is induced through a desire for reward is mercenary and false. However, that other desire is free; it does not seek reward and is happy. Therefore the people of Christ are called in Hebrew נִדְבָתִי, that is, spontaneous, voluntary, and generous. From all this it becomes clear that if this psalm is not understood of Christ alone, it becomes a mirror and a goal toward which the blessed man must strive. For there is no one in this life who does not lack something of this will because of the law and desire in his members which is contrary to it, as the apostle laments in Rom. 7:23. According to theology, this wrongful desire must be crucified; but according to philosophy, it is to be considered as true virtue.

“Meditate,” some say, is to examine, investigate and, in general, to treat verbally, as in Ps. 37:30: “The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom.” Hence Augustine has in Ms translation, “to chatter,” really a beautiful metaphor, because chattering is an exercise of the birds.²⁰ Therefore it is the office of a man whose proper duty is to converse on something, to discourse about the Law of the Lord. Even the poet uses meditating in this way: “You make out of delicate reeds the song of the muse of the forest.”²¹ It is not possible to describe satisfactorily the strength and beauty of these words. For this meditation consists first in close attention to the words of the Law, and then in drawing together various parts of Scripture. And this is a pleasant hunt, a game rather like the play of stags in the forest, where “the Lord arouses the stags, and uncovers the forests.” (Ps. 29:9.) For out of this will proceed a sermon to the people which is well informed in the Law of the Lord.

For example, if you skim superficially over the words “you shall not kill,” they are cold words, and, according to the literal sound, you hear that killing a man is prohibited. But pause and observe that it does not say: Your hand shall not kill, but you yourself. Yet who is this “you”? It consists of your soul and body, and in them you also have many powers: hands, tongue, eyes, mind, and will. Therefore when you are prohibited from killing, are you then not also taught that it is wrong to kill with the hand, or with the tongue, or by your desire? For when one of these commits the crime, it is really you. Therefore you should not be angry or ill-natured, not revile or slander, not turn away your face, not ridicule or injure or wish to harm; but, on the contrary, you should love, bless, and do good. What now? Truly, “You shall not kill” will mean that you should not be bitter and angry but agreeable and friendly toward your neighbor. You see in how many places the Scriptures teach of love, tolerance, friendliness, good will, kindness, and mercy. When you have taken these together, have you not lovingly chattered and meditated on the Law of your Lord?

“Day and night.” Whether you take this literally or as a figure of speech meaning constantly, or as an allegory referring to the time of adversity or prosperity, it does not matter. For the righteous man loves the Law of the Lord and thinks on it even when he sleeps.

Therefore he says: This happy man will have his desire in the Law of the Lord. Forthwith he will see, love, or hate nothing, neither good nor evil, but through his desire he will be elevated over all

creation. Is it surprising if he is blessed who is gifted with this heavenly desire and has no interest in things which shatter those who have a fools sense of blessedness? Furthermore, because through this desire he has already become one with the Word of God (as love unites the lover with the beloved), it is necessary that he taste how good, sweet, pure, holy, and wonderful is the Word of God, the greatest good. They cannot possibly taste it who are in the Law only with their hand or tongue, while their will is sunk in the morass of earthly things. For there are many chatterers who say much, pretend much, and deliberate much about the Law of the Lord but as yet do not love it. The psalmist does not say: Blessed is the man whose tongue or hands or opinion or speculation is in the Law of the Lord. For it is through these that they only puff up and flatter themselves, as if they were already holy and righteous.

Moreover, this desire is the whole life of man. For there is no danger that he would be outside the Law in any of his other members who is within the Law in his will, the fountain and head of life. Wherever love goes, there the heart and the body follow. Again, we are able to see the contrasting life of the pious and the impious. The ungodly begin their righteousness from the outside and proceed inward. First they pretend works, then words, and only afterwards do they practice thinking; and this is the greatest height they reach. Then they soon become masters of others. They insist that all they think, do, and say, is holy and divine, although they never arrive at the hidden will. The godly, on the other hand, begin from the inside. They start with this holy desire, and then follow meditation and external works, and after this the teaching of others, as we shall see.

“And on His Law he meditates day and night.” This meditation is not beyond criticism unless the will comes first, for love itself will teach meditation. Truly, as we despair of our own strength, we must through a humble faith in Christ pray (as I have said) that the desire be sent down from heaven. Note this well: It is the mode and nature of all who love, to chatter, sing, think, compose, and frolic freely about what they love and to enjoy hearing about it. Therefore this lover, this blessed man, has his love, the Law of God, always in his mouth, always in his heart and, if possible, always in his ear. “He who is of God hears the words of God” (John 8:47); and “Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage” (Ps. 119:54); and again, “I will delight in Thy statutes, I will not forget Thy Word” (Ps. 119:6).

However, those who feed on the husks of the swine, who chatter day and night about natural things, the opinions of men, income, rank, the powers and privileges of churches, and countless such trifles—do you believe that they are blessed? On the contrary, they are much more miserable than those who chatter about love affairs with maidens or the fables of poets. For these know that what they do is foolishness and that sometime they can repent. However, those others imagine themselves prudent and holy; and they die in their ungodliness. And finally, after they have by their righteousness heaped unrighteousness and iniquity upon themselves, they repent in vain. For they do not meditate on the Law of the Lord.

3. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season.

I have said that the blessedness of this man is hidden in the spirit, i.e., in God, so that it cannot be known except through faith or experience. That this is true you will clearly see if you evaluate his desire, where blessedness alone is found, not in riches, not in honor, not in his own righteousness or virtue. Nor is it found in any good that can be named within or without man, except in this desire for the Law. It can rather be found in the opposite, in poverty, contempt, ignorance, and all manner of evil that can be named within or without man. Therefore the man whom the prophet here calls blessed is unanimously declared by the world to be the most wretched of all, as Isaiah looked upon Christ, the Head and Model of the blessed, whom he calls the lowest of all (Is. 53:3). Thus the world and its rulers cannot tolerate a man who through this “desire” wants to be blessed and scorns their blessings. It is for this reason that the prophet, since he saw how rare they are, began thus: “O blessed is the man who ...,” etc.

Now, having described the man with the proper definition of blessedness, he speaks of him under an equally beautiful picture. The definition was certainly complete, for it declared him evil and full of all goodness; and even the people call this blessedness, although with reference to the things of this world, while he refers to faith. Thus also this picture represents him as free of that evil and full of goodness; for the blessed man, who is hidden in faith, cannot be visually described by any example. As one who defines something must do, the psalmist employs the picture of a visible object; and because he describes the righteous man figuratively, it is not necessary to anger over the individual words.

I believe that the palm tree is used as a paraphrase. For another psalm says (92:12): "The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon." Thus that which is briefly touched on there is richly expanded here. For the palm trees love the streams of water and (as Pliny said) like to drink from them all year long, perpetually blooming and bearing very sweet fruits.²² Perhaps he derived this simile from the palm trees which are numerous at Jericho on the Jordan; for on this account, it is thought, Jericho is called the city of palms. And also in many other places in Scripture the Jordan has secret meanings.²³ It is from such a metaphor that this passage also comes (Song of Sol. 4:15): "A well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon."

Here the prophet has given a guide to the understanding of the allegories of trees and flowing waters which we meet in the Scriptures. A tree represents a man, a good tree a good man, and a bad tree an evil man; as Christ also teaches (Matt. 7:17 ff.). True, I know that St. Augustine, hard pressed by the Pelagians, wants "tree" to be understood as the will of man rather than as the man, in order not to admit that sinless children are born from a marriage of believers.²⁴ And perhaps it would help him to say that the spiritual man, who is essentially the will or spirit, is described here. But I believe it is as well, and even much better, to speak of the whole man as a tree, making the roots the will and the branches the members and strength. Yet I will not argue over it.

The psalmist says: "he is planted," wherein he distinguishes between the planted trees and the ones that grow by themselves. It becomes what it is by the care and culture of someone else, not by its own nature. In short, it is cut off from those that grew by themselves of their own nature, and it is artificially planted elsewhere as a sprout. As I have said before, the desire for the Law of the Lord is not by nature in any man. But as the Heavenly Father plants and cultivates, and transplants us out of Adam into Christ, it is conferred on us from heaven.

By "streams of water" he certainly means the streams of divine grace. For it is said that the palm grows in a light, sandy, nitrous, and salty soil; therefore it wants to have perpetual rivers around it. Therefore this desire, the root of this tree, located in this arid, unfruitful life, thirsts after the brooks of heavenly waters all the more, the less it finds in the world to quicken it. Thus another psalm (63:1): "... as in a dry and weary land"; and Is. 53:2: "For He grew up before Him like a root out of dry ground." Is it not wonderful to grow trees in sterile ground, nourished only by flowing waters? And blessed is he who, as the world grows more sterile for him, thirsts all the more for the heavenly streams. This tree does not grow in a fat land, nor the blessed man in the splendor of the world.

Some have investigated why the prophet chose to say "wood" rather than "tree," and why he said "he will give fruit" rather than "he will bear fruit."²⁵ In Gen. 1:11 we read that God created "wood," not a "tree"; and this metaphor is preserved in the Scriptures: wood for tree. To bring forth fruit indicates that this blessed man, through love (which we have seen is commanded in every Law of the Lord), serves not himself but his neighbors. It is not a tree which bears fruit for itself, but it brings its fruit for others. In fact, no creature lives for himself or serves only himself except man and the devil. The sun does not shine for itself, water does not flow for itself, etc. Certainly every creature serves the law of love, and its whole substance is in the Law of the Lord. Even the members of the human body do not serve only themselves. Only the passions of the heart are ungodly. For this ungodly passion not only gives no one his own, serves no one, is kind to no one, but snatches everything for itself, looks for its own in everything, even in God Himself. Thus one can rightly call this tree a thornbush or wild shoot which no one cultivates and which does not enjoy standing beside the streams of water. It brings forth nothing but thorns, with which it sticks, tears, and chokes the fruit of all surrounding trees and even the trees themselves. Then it grasps, plucks, and tears the clothes, hide, skin, flesh, and everything of all who pass. Therefore the prophet has expressed the kindness of the good trees, which do no man evil but help all men, while willingly giving their fruits.

"In his season." Oh, this is a golden and lovable word, through which the freedom of the righteous Christian is affirmed! The ungodly have fixed days, fixed times, certain works, and certain places to which they are so firmly bound that even if their neighbor were to die of starvation, they could not tear themselves away from them. But that blessed man is free at all times, in every work, for every place, and toward every person. Whatever the situation, he will serve you; and whatever his hand finds to do, he will do it. He is not a Jew; neither is he a Gentile, a Greek, or a barbarian. He is strictly no one person; but he gives his fruit in his season, as often as God or man needs his works. Therefore his fruit has no

name, nor his time, nor he himself, nor his streams of water. Neither does he, as one individual, serve one person, at one time, in one place, or in one work; but he serves everyone, everywhere, and always. He is in truth the man of all seasons, all works, all persons, and in the image of his Father, all in all and above all.

Truly the ungodly, as Ps. 18:45 declares, are captive in their distress; they imprison themselves and torture themselves in their self-chosen works, times, and places outside of which they imagine nothing good can happen. They value their own fruits and do nothing but bite, judge, and condemn the fruits of others. They are ready and free at all times to criticize others, and they are the same in doing evil as the pious are in doing good. For these are also men of every hour. They do not slander and injure in only one way, at one time, or against one man, but wherever there is opportunity. If they turned these efforts toward goodness, they could find no better and shorter way to piety. I certainly do not say that I would condemn the ceremonies of churches and monasteries; for this was the first discipline of the religious, that he who enters a monastery learns to obey his superior, not to labor for himself but to serve everyone in every way. Truly it was the monasteries that served as schools for the exercise and perfection of Christian liberty. They still are, at least those who preserve the old order; and this, I say, was the purpose and method of the ceremonies. For what else are the works of charity and compassion than a kind of free ceremony, since in themselves they are external and physical? And the ceremonies of the old Law were, in like manner, most useful exercises of true and free piety. But when man began to apply them wrongfully to the detriment of freedom, and under their pretext to extinguish it, so that slavery ruled in the place of freedom, it became necessary to remove them altogether. Just so it should be the concern of a godly pastor to put a stop to confused ceremonials, where they flourish only as snares for the soul and obstacles to free godliness.

And its leaf does not wither.

He continues the very beautiful figure. “Leaf” means the Word and the doctrine in general. But we have said that the palm tree has perpetually green forage. In contrast, Isaiah says of the ungodly (1:30): “You shall be like an oak, whose leaf withers.” Now compare the one with the other. The ungodly walk in their own counsels; the godly, loving the Law, is like a tree firmly planted by streams of water. They sit in the seat of the scornful; his leaves remain green and shall not wither.

And note that he describes the fruit before the leaves. Now it is the nature of the palm that it does not have its fruit between the leaves, as other trees do, but between the branches, with all the foliage on the top, so that one can see that it produces fruit before foliage; for we have said that this illustration was drawn from the palm tree. Yet the Spirit Himself instructs a preacher of the church, so that he should know that the kingdom of God is not in talk but in power (1 Cor. 4:20). “Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1), and “He was a man mighty in deed and word” (Luke 24:19). Thus he who would be a teacher of the Word of doctrine must first show the fruits of his life if he does not want his leaves to wither. For just as the tree is despised whose luxurious foliage is without fruit—and Christ cursed the fig tree which did not bear fruit (Matt. 21:19)—so it is, as St. Gregory teaches, that his doctrine is condemned whose life is despised; for they preach to others and are themselves disqualified.²⁶ And Matt. 7:23 foretells what they will hear in the Judgment: “Depart from Me, you evildoers.” This is true even though they prophesy in His name and have done many deeds for others through the Word of Christ.

Yet it is possible that someone may say: “There are many saints and martyrs who have left behind neither fruits nor foliage, for all these have been lost with them. Neither do we have all the words of the apostles. How can this praise of the blessed man be a general statement?”

I answer: Their word was not their word; “for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matt. 10:20). All the saints are taught the same Word; therefore they teach the same Word, just as in 1 Cor. 10:4: “All ate the same food and all drank the same drink.” “But the Word of the Lord abides forever” (1 Peter 1:25), and His truth endures throughout all generations. One can also see that this blessed man and this fruitful tree signifies the whole church or all those who are in the preaching ministry. But there is nothing to forbid the application to every righteous man, for he also has the same leaves. If he does not teach others, certainly he teaches himself, meditating in his heart on the Law of God. This Word also remains eternally in him, just as in the whole church. Finally, since all the faithful are one body, even though this leaf belongs only to the one member who speaks through communion it all belongs to them all. For when I preach, it is my word which my tongue preaches,

though I am only the ear and not the tongue. So you should also think about the remaining members and the whole body.

In all that he does, he prospers.

When he says this concerning the tree or palm, he refers to what is said only of the palm tree, that it grows upwards in spite of adverse weight and pressure. And it is said that this is seen also in beams made from palm trees.

Here “to do” does not mean (if I am not too daring) the good works of a righteous man, for these have been sufficiently praised under the name of fruits. It refers rather to creations or products, as we fashion works of art. Thus the philosophers refer “doing” to knowledge and “making” to art.²⁷ The same distinction can also be found in the Hebrew language, as I dare claim; for there I see that the word עָשָׂה is used for “doing” and פָּעַל for “acting.” Thus Ps. 28:5: “Because they do not regard the works of the Lord, or the work of His hands,” namely, that the work of His hands is His created object, as He says (Is. 19:25): “And Israel is the work of My hands.” Again (Gen. 1:7): “And God made ...”; and Ps. 95:5: “The sea is His, and He made it.” But the works of God are those that He performs through creatures, especially the Word and grace, through which He works and causes us to work.

Therefore let “doing” mean to establish, arrange, and place into various church offices, and as the apostles Peter and Paul have taught, to make servants of the manifold grace of God, found churches and multiply them. Thus the believers are themselves their creation, work, and product. For thus does the apostle “bear” the Galatians (Gal. 4:19) and “father” the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:15). “Are you not my workmanship in the Lord?” (1 Cor. 9:1) he says. You understand, therefore, that this “work” of the blessed man is a spiritual one, not palaces, empires, and parades. For these the Gentiles also produce and bring forth; but to make many people good and blessed and like themselves, this is exclusively the work of the man who is blessed.

However, beware that prosperity is not understood as prosperity of the flesh. This prospering is hidden; it is so deep within the spirit that if you do not hold fast to it in faith, you might rather call it the greatest adversity. For just as the devil violently hates the “leaves” and the Word of God, so he also hates those who teach it and listen to it; and he persecutes them with the help of the powers of the whole world. So you are witness to the greatest of all miracles when you hear that everything prospers which the blessed man does. For what is more wonderful than that the believers increase when they are destroyed, that they multiply when they are diminished, that they overcome when they are subdued, that they enter when they are cast out, that they are victorious when they are defeated? Thus the world and its prince are vanquished. Thus God exalts His saints, that the height of misfortune becomes the height of prosperity. This is the prosperity of the wise and the life of these men.

Now we see that the words of Prov. 1:32 are fulfilled: “For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them.” For now, since we have identified the affairs of the church with persons and names and have drawn the spirit into the flesh, the good estate of the church is now called wealth, tyranny, license, fleshly freedom, and more than worldly splendor. The devil finally saw and understood this prosperity of the spirit. Therefore he controlled himself and attacked us in a different way, where, to our fearful misfortune, he triumphed. Thus he who was conquered in war now triumphs in peace, in both instances by the wondrous order of God. For this reason St. Hilary has rightly said it is the nature of the church to grow under adversity and to decrease in prosperity.²⁸ Truly, this wisdom of the cross and this new meaning of things is not merely unknown but by far the most fearful thing even for the rulers of the church. Yet it is no wonder, since they have abandoned the Holy Scriptures and have begun to read unholy writings of men and the dissertations on finances instead.

4. Not so are the ungodly.

In the Hebrew “not so” is said only once, but this is of little consequence. However, since you hear about the ungodly, then remember what we have said earlier about ungodliness, lest you associate this word only with the Jews, heretics, and who knows how many other distant peoples, and lest you also lay aside your fear of God and cease to honor His Word. But since he who is without faith in Christ is ungodly, you also should tremble at these words, lest you be found ungodly. For the truly pious tremble before every Word of God, as it is written Is. 66:2: “But this is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at My Word.” How can you, then, be assured that you have enough faith? To the extent that you lack faith, you have ungodliness. For that is the way of the ungodly,

that whatever is good they arrogantly ascribe to themselves, and whatever is evil, to others. On the other hand, the way of the devout is that they believe that evil is intended for them and the good belongs to others. And despite great unworthiness they long for this, so that they attain it, not by merit but only by hope in the mercy of God.

Therefore the ungodly do not prosper; their leaves shall wither, and they are not planted by running water. So listen now with the spirit to the prophet who speaks from the spirit. For all the Scriptures cry aloud that the ungodly flourish and prosper. We shall see the same thing in many psalms, enough that you might well say of them alone: Their leaves grow, and all that they do prospers. Therefore faith is necessary.

But are like the dust which the wind drives away from the face of the earth.

The Latin adds “from the face of the earth,” but without endangering the understanding. Similarly it matters not that the Hebrew says *רֶגֶז*, meaning “chaff,” the fine dust or the waste of grain. It is the same thing whether it says dust, husk, ashes, or chaff. For these are the ones of whom it is written (Luke 3:17): “His winnowing fork is in His hand, to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His granary; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.” This is what rubbish, chaff, and dust undoubtedly signify here, although rightly and appropriately it means husks and crushed chaff. We find the same meaning in Job 21:18: “They are like straw before the wind, and like chaff that the storm carries away.”

And observe, he does not simply call them chaff, but chaff which the wind drives. He does not refer to chaff just lying there, but to that which is scattered, unsettled, restless. This applies to the Jews first of all. They are driven about in a threefold manner. First, in a bodily manner by the whirlwind. That is, by the will and indignation of men among whom they live. As we can see, they have no fixed home but at every moment are exposed to such a wind, which drives them here and there. Secondly, their minds are carried in all directions by the wind of many doctrines (Eph. 4:14) taught by unholy doctors, since they are not planted in Christian faith. Moreover, their hearts are driven to and fro by uncertain doctrines; nor can their conscience be certain and at peace. Thirdly, on the Last Day they shall be scattered by the eternal stormwinds of the unbearable wrath of God, driven about constantly, with no place to rest, not even for a moment. The very same thing happens to the heretics, especially in the last two stormwinds.

And what else in the church do you suppose it is but the whirlwind of the wrath of God, through which we are propelled down the same road by so many, so diverse, so changeable, and so uncertain teachings as the countless briefs of the jurists and the opinions of the theologians? And since Christ is inwardly unknown, we are driven to many shoals, whirlpools, and clashings of the conscience and are miserably dashed to pieces. The other ungodly ones also have their whirlwinds and storms of desire and lust in riches, honor, acclamation, and other commotions of this world; by these they are miserably crushed, because they despise the one rock, the solid ground of our heart.

5. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

Enough has been said as to who are the godless and the sinners. Now listen, and not without trembling, to this sermon of your God, as if you were godly and holy. This fear itself is piety, yes, the source and beginning of wisdom and piety (Ps. 111:10).

The Hebrew has “they will rise,” not “they will rise again”; and it does not speak of the resurrection of the dead. For he has not said: Men will not rise again in judgment, but “the ungodly.” The resurrection of man is one thing, that of the ungodly, another. Therefore the Apostles’ Creed speaks rightly of the resurrection of the body more than it does of that of man. And the apostle calls it the resurrection of the dead or of man, evidently teaching two resurrections: of the body and of the spirit. But here to rise up means that the ungodly will not stand with the just in the presence of God, as we see in Ps. 5:5: “Neither shall the wicked dwell near Thee, nor shall the unjust abide before Thy eyes,” and in Ps. 24:3: “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord, and who shall stand in His holy place?” Thus it is said of Christ (Ps. 76:10): “When He rises for judgment,” and in Ps. 12:5: “I will now arise, says the Lord.” Therefore “they will not rise up” is the same as they will not stand, win not serve, and will not minister to God, no matter how much they take it for granted.

Here “judgment” means an office, according to the metaphor of Scripture. Thus the whole Book of Judges is so named from the judges or rulers. Ps. 122:5 says: “There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.” And concerning Christ Ps. 110:6 says: “He will execute judgment

among the nations,” that is, He will judge the Gentiles. Again (Ps. 72:4): “May He defend the cause of the poor,” that is, He will rule them; and Ps. 96:13: “He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with His truth.”

This is the meaning: The ungodly will never rise up to the point where they become judges and masters of the believers, and they will never be in their council, that is, their congregation. They will belong neither to the leaders nor even to the lowly of the righteous. Therefore, more clearly: The ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; they will absolutely not be reckoned among the servants of God.

But what about them? Shall we cast down the godless rulers and evil men and eject them from our midst? Or is there a congregation of the faithful where the godless stand as rulers and sinners are intermingled? God forbid!

I have said that the prophet spoke in the spirit; therefore he must be heard in the spirit. For just as Judas was an apostle and yet not an apostle, as John says (1 John 2:19): “They went out from us, but they were not of us,” so the godless, while they rule and are before men visibly in power, really have no power at all. For Zech. 11:17 says: “O shepherd, idol, who deserts the flock!” He at once calls him “shepherd,” because under that name he is honored before man, and “idol,” as he is in reality condemned before God. Christ also pays off many godless in this life with a small reward, so that we may realize that rulership is not the field of the believer. Therefore one must endure both, like chaff among the wheat, until the day of winnowing.

Let us see whether the prophet clearly indicates this. Since he has said before: “The ungodly are not so,” it would not have been necessary to repeat this in another verse; but it is sufficient to say: “They will not rise up in judgment,” not even in the council of (sinners) the righteous.²⁹ He has removed from consideration any personality and outward show of men, because the rich and the mighty, and whatever else is outward show, can stand in judgment and in the council of the just. All this concerns the body, but in the matter of the ungodly and sinners this is not so. That is why the whole emphasis and accent is on the words “ungodly” and “sinners.” In spirit and in truth they are never in power, and the ungodly are never among the faithful, even though they have such a brilliant appearance of life that one might think no one has a greater right to rule or to be among the believers. This is the pretense and the hypocrisy denounced in this psalm; with it they inflate themselves, become presumptuous, and deceive themselves and others. That this is the correct sense of this verse is shown by the following verse.

6. For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

The translator could have got along without his variety of expression and could have said: “The way of the wicked.” For it is the same language, and the contrast was good enough: “The way of the righteous, the way of the wicked,” and simplicity of words would have been preserved.³⁰

The way of the ungodly, he says, has such a beautiful appearance that they are looked upon by men as if they could rise in judgment and council. But He who is not deceived knows their ways; He knows them to be ungodly, and before Him they do not belong to His church. He knows only the just, not the unjust; that is, He does not approve of them. In the same manner, as they believe least of all, their way will perish. I say it will perish even though it flourishes to such an extent that it would seem to be eternal. Notice how the psalmist frightens us away from the appearance of good fortune and recommends a variety of trials and adversities. For men in general disapprove of this way of the righteous and believe that God does not recognize it either. But because this is the wisdom of the cross, God alone knows the way of the righteous. It is hidden even to the righteous; for His right hand leads them in such a wonderful way that it is not the way of the senses or of reason but of faith alone, which is able to see even in darkness and behold the invisible.

Therefore when we obey the ungodly pastors, it is not the ungodly, but men whom we obey. For we do not listen to or follow their wickedness, but we submit to human authority. Again, when men reject them and drive them away, as we have seen it happen in Bohemia,³¹ is it the ungodly whom they drive out? No, they drive out men. For though the ungodly are driven out, they still remain ungodly. However, the wicked one is really driven out when he is led from wickedness to piety; and this does not happen outwardly through violence, but through love, which prays internally and admonishes externally, with the co-operation of God.

Whoever will not accept this understanding, let him hold the other, that the psalmist first calls the Jews ungodly. For it is predicted in many other places that they will be driven out of the church. However, the heretics, too, and all who openly manifest their ungodliness sometimes cut themselves off from the church, and sometimes the church excludes and excommunicates them, no matter how much they boast that they alone are the church and the people of God.

Finally, there is to be considered what the most illustrious fathers, especially Athanasius and Augustine, have taught, namely, that we should adapt and adjust our minds and feelings so that they are in accord with the sense of the psalms.³² For since the psalter is only a kind of school and exercise for the disposition of the heart, he sings in vain who does not sing in the spirit. When you, therefore, read: “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly,” it should at the same time move you to detest and despise the counsel of the ungodly, not only for yourself but, in general, for the whole church. And this applies also to the way of sinners and subversive doctrines. For by this fire, the glow of love, the heretics are to be consumed, and all who understand and teach ungodliness. Because we have despised this fire, God has given us over to wrong notions, so that we have become hangmen and burn heretics with natural fire, to be consumed ourselves in turn. So when you say: “But their delight is in the Law of the Lord,” you should not rest assured and pat yourself on the back, as if you were one who loves the Law of God. Rather you should sigh with the greatest possible ardor to Him who alone has come to send fire upon the earth (Luke 12:49). And as long as you live, think of yourself in no other way than as one who does not yet love God’s Law and who desperately needs this desire for the Law.

So when you hear that “the righteous prosper,” you should choose this course for yourself and lament for the others who are in a state of adversity. Furthermore, you should wish that your “leaf does not wither,” so that the pure Word of God may bloom in the church of Christ and all fables and fantasies of men may be cast aside. And if you should happen to see this good fortune somewhere, congratulate yourself, rejoice, and thank God for His goodness. Do not believe that this is an impossible demand on you; only make the attempt, and I know you will be happy and thankful. First practice on one psalm, even one little verse of the psalm. You will progress enough if you learn to make only one verse a day, or even one a week, live and breathe in your heart. After this beginning is made, everything else will follow, and you will have a rich treasury of understanding and affection. Only see that you do not let weariness and discouragement scare you out of beginning it. For this is truly to sing psalms, or, as the Scriptures say of David, to strike the harp with the hand.³³ For the light fingers of the harpist are the emotions of the heart moving about in the words of the psalms. Without this the strings do not sound, and the psalm is not sung, because it is not touched.

This I want to impress on you once more in this first psalm, so that it may not be necessary to repeat it for each individual psalm. I know that whoever becomes practiced in this will find more by himself in the Psalter than all the interpretations of other men can give him. I see that St. Bernard was an expert in this art and drew from it all the wealth of his learning. I have sensed this also in St. Augustine and others. Therefore we must drink the waters of life from the same source, so that the ridicule of the prophet Amos may not apply to us (Amos 6:5): “Like David, they imagine they have instruments (that is, psalters) of music”; and again (Amos 5:23): “Take away from Me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.” For how do you think this howling and murmuring without mind and spirit, which resounds everywhere in the temples, will strike God, except as a swarm of flies buzzing with their wings? This is especially true if you also believe that God is pleased with it and thus make mockery and a fantasy of the living and true God.

PSALM • 2

1. *Why do the heathen conspire, and the peoples meditate in vain?*

2. *The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and His Christ.*

THAT David was the author of this psalm, and that it speaks of Christ, is established through the authority of the primitive church. For Luke wrote in Acts 4:24–28: “They lifted their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything that is in them, who through the mouth of our father David, Thy servant, didst say by the Holy Spirit: Why did the Gentiles rage and the people meditate vain things? The kings of the earth set themselves in array, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against His Christ. For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy Servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and

Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy plan had predestined to take place.’ ”

Therefore the mind must be strengthened in this interpretation and not be blown about by other winds of doctrine (Eph. 4:14); for this understanding was confirmed by heaven when the place shook at the end of their prayers, as Luke also writes (Acts 4:31).

It should be made clear that Herod and Pilate are understood as being “the kings of the earth,” even though Pilate was not exactly a king. These two worked together, with the result that they fulfilled what the wisdom of God had decreed, just as these words say; that is, they killed Christ. No other kings did this, neither does he speak of any other situations than that which befell Christ under Pilate. It is necessary, then, that we untie this meaningless knot: Either Pilate is called a king along with Herod, or he is called king after the manner of Scripture, in which it is customary for the name of a part to be applied to the whole. For instance, Israel is called the first-born son, even though many among them were idolatrous; on the other hand, all of them were punished, although only a few deserved it. Therefore both men were called kings because one was a king.

Now it is perfectly clear that the “rulers” are understood to be the chief priests; the “heathen” are the Roman soldiers under Pilate, who seized, beat, and crucified Jesus; and the “people” are the common people of the Jews or Israel, as they themselves say.³⁴

Furthermore, in this place the “heathen” are plainly distinguished from the “people”; but I do not venture to say, nor do I believe, that this distinction is consistent throughout, even though the word “heathen” is used very frequently in contrast to Israel or the Jews. For the terms “Gentile church” and “Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles” are used by many writers and in common practice, in contrast to the Jewish church or that which came from the Jews.

Notice the exact observance of the divisions: the nations conspire, the people meditate in vain, the kings rise up, and the rulers take counsel together. The nations rage like unthinking beasts, since they are ignorant of what they do. The people, however, chatter and babble their counsel among themselves, that is, they speak nonsense against the Most High and surround Him with speeches of hate. For they say (Mark 12:7): “Come, let us kill Him, and the inheritance will be ours.”³⁵ And John 11:49: “Caiaphas said to the assembled council: ‘You know nothing at all, you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people.’ ” This, you see, was the empty line of talk by means of which they so often sought to destroy Christ, and here the psalmist calls the figments of their accusation before Pilate empty meditations.

Moreover, the rulers set themselves up (this is to be understood from the Hebrew “to rise up”);³⁶ that is, they determined, proclaimed, and made sure of the roaring and the thinking of the people when they passed sentence on Christ. “So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowds, released Barabbas to them, but delivered Jesus to be crucified” (Mark 15:15). The leaders convened and took counsel; at the same time they used persuasive words and were strengthened in their resolution to destroy Jesus. For they stirred up the crowd to prefer Barabbas.

Note the modesty and temperance in the speech of the prophet, how mildly and, so to speak, compassionately he expresses their rage. For although he could have spoken of their raging cries of (Luke 23:18–21): “Away, away with Him, crucify, crucify Him” and the other wild clamor by which the Jews accused Christ as madness and violence, he only calls them speeches. However, “meditation,” as we have said above,³⁷ is continual talking and conversation with the mouth. For this is evil meditation. For just as the lover willingly talks at length about his beloved, so the hater keeps on talking and babbling the worst things about him whom he hates. There is similar temperance in the words “conspire,” “rise up,” and “take counsel together”; for this situation itself is far more horrible than the meaning of these words would indicate.

Hereby we are taught that we should not exaggerate the wickedness of men after the manner of slanderers but should play it down as much as possible, so that we show ourselves not so much outraged for our own sakes as saddened by their misery. The Holy Spirit is merciful and does not glorify Himself by the wickedness of others but has a kindly compassion for all. As St. Peter relates (1 Peter 2:23), Christ did not slander or threaten when He suffered; nor did He desire revenge, but He turned everything over to Him who judges righteously.

The psalmist says “in vain,” and in this word he summarizes nearly the whole subject of the psalm. For the prophet wishes to show that Christ is a King ordained by God the Father and that many great Gentiles and Jews, kings and rulers, have not been able to hinder His kingship with their counsels, oppositions, strivings, and rages. They spent everything so fruitlessly that they made a mockery of themselves; the more they resisted, the more they promoted the kingdom of Christ. It is as though the psalmist wished with this psalm to provide an illustration for what he said in Ps. 1:3: “Whatever he does, shall prosper,” insofar as this applies to Christ. The words of Ps. 45:4 are related to this: “Increase in Thy splendor and beauty, prosper and rule.” And Ps. 118:25f.: “O Lord, give us success! Blessed be He who enters in the name of the Lord.” For the prosperity of Christ, as I have said, is not of this world or of the flesh, but of the spirit. Is there anyone who, while Christ was suffering, would not have thought that He would never become even the lowest of men or live again, much less be King over all things? Who would not have believed then that the meditations of the people were confirmed and not in vain, when they gloried in the fact that they had condemned Him to the curse of the cross by the authority of God Himself and thought that their meditations were secure for eternity? What is more, faith and hope are always necessary in the works of God, requiring not only a submission but an understanding; for His works are fulfilled contrary to all sense and beyond all comprehension.

The following is also a word of faith: “Against the Lord and against His Christ.” Everyone else, and they themselves especially, looked on them as working for the Lord and for Christ. Just so today and always, the ungodly are working under frightful risk against the glory of God, when they seem to be working for the glory of God. For God rules the earth and turns their wisdom into foolishness, so that those who are reputed to work for the glory of God in reality serve to blaspheme Him, and those who are accused of blasphemy truly contend for the glory of God. His way is in concealment, in faith, and in the holy place. The courtyard should not be measured; for it is given to the heathen, says Rev. 11:2.³⁸

The psalmist first says “against God” and then “against His Christ,” because all sin first of all offends God. For He is not only justice but also love of justice; and whoever loves justice, receives it from Him. It would not be sin if it did not offend God.

But he also arranges the words in this manner that we may learn for our consolation and exhortation that we never suffer injustice without God suffering it first and more than we and that God the Father’s solicitude for us is so great that He feels our suffering before we do and bears it with greater resentment than we ourselves. Therefore we should refrain from a feeling of revenge but should rather have compassion on those whom we see dashing themselves to their destruction against a majesty so great; for not only are they unable to do any harm, but they destroy themselves horribly. So it is written (Zech. 2:8): “Whoever touches you, touches the pupil of My eye.” For the prophet, as though saddened by their arrogance, begins first with the questions: “Why do they rage? Why do they make themselves ridiculous? Why do those fools undertake impossible things? O that they were wise and understood!” Then he encourages and admonishes them to work for something substantial instead of something fruitless. That is, they should rather be instructed and become wise, that they may serve Christ with fear. Finally, by the fine shading of words he brings out their folly and their futile efforts. He says, “They rage, they talk, they rise up, they counsel,” as if to say: “You can rage, but you will not be able to destroy; you will chatter and babble much, but you will accomplish nothing; the kings have resolved, and nothing will happen; the rulers will take counsel, and it will have no effect. Therefore what do you get out of it except that by your futile efforts you have wanted much, attempted difficult things, sought for everything, and accomplished none of these things; but everything rather turned out just the other way?”

Thus God permits the ungodly to raise their roaring, counsel, and striving against the godly. Yet these are all like swollen streams of water which with their swelling beat against the shore as if they would overwhelm it; and before the waves reach the shore, they collapse and fade away or are dashed against the shore with empty chatter. For the righteous, as a strong bulwark in faith in Christ, confidently despises these weak threats and quickly collapsing commotions. He knows that Moab is very boastful, that his strength is never as great as his presumption, and that his anger is greater than his ability, as Is. 16:6 and Jer. 48:29 tell us.

With this cross the ungodly are quite fittingly tormented, since it is a particular torment when one wants to do harm in all things and yet cannot harm anything. Even the pagans have said of envy: “The

Sicilian tyrants have suffered no greater torment than envy.”³⁹ In the case of Christians this is an even greater grace; for not only are the ungodly tormented, and not only is it impossible for them to do harm, but by God’s counsel their torment and their vain plots must serve most of all to promote what they seek to prevent. Thus the friends of a Christian are really not as useful to him as his enemies.

3. *Let us burst Their bonds asunder, and cast Their cords from us.*

This verse must be connected with the words “they conspire,” “they meditate,” and “they rise up.” The meaning, therefore, is this: Of course, they roar, babble, rise up, and resolve, in order to withdraw their necks from the yoke of God and Christ, break Their cords, and say (Luke 19:14): “We do not want this Man to reign over us.” Or, as in Job 21:14–15: “They say to God, ‘Depart from us! We do not desire the knowledge of Thy ways. What is the Almighty, that we should serve Him? And what profit do we get if we pray to Him?’ ” Thus the prophet introduces the words of the ungodly. Others see different meanings, but for now I will follow this interpretation.⁴⁰ What others see as an objection, namely, that he speaks in the plural, “Their,” must refer to “the Lord and His Christ.” For evidently there are two, God and Man, the Sender and the Sent, as one might say: The people have rejected the ambassador as well as the ruler and have not accepted their counsels.

Moreover, Jer. 5:4–5 shows that the divine rule is signified by these bonds and yokes through allegory or metaphor: “Then I said: ‘These are only the poor; they have no sense, for they do not know the way of the Lord, the Law of their God. I will go to the great and will speak to them; for they know the way of the Lord, the Law of their God.’ But they all alike had broken the yoke; they had burst the bonds.” And again in Jer. 2:20: “For long ago you broke My yoke and burst My bonds.” However, this passage has been distorted, since God in the Hebrew text speaks in the first person: “For long ago I broke your yoke and burst your bonds,” so that bonds are set against bonds, yoke against yoke, the way of God against the way of man, and the judgment of God against the judgment of man.

“Bonds” are the commandments of Christ, by which we are taught to walk in His way. The “yokes” or “ropes” are the judgment, which forbids us to do evil. Thus the former is the justification of the spirit; the latter, the mortification of the flesh. Two things are prescribed: to abstain from evil and to do good. The first serves to crucify the desires of the flesh, and the second to do good works. However, this is not altered even if the two are exchanged, namely, if one were to refer the bonds to judgment and the yoke to righteousness. The sense remains the same. When one has that, one should not quarrel about words.

Moreover, the whole verse is allegorical; for “break” is taken to mean despise and make vain, “bonds” stands for commandments, “rejects” for disobedience, disregard, and nonacceptance, and finally, “yoke” for instruction and discipline in chastening the flesh. However, I do not mean to speak allegorically after the manner of the modernists,⁴¹ as if another historical sense were to be sought underneath, other than that which is expressed. What I do mean is that he has expressed the true and proper sense in figurative language.

Observe: To the perverse all things are perverse, as it is written (Ps. 18:26): “To the crooked Thou dost show Thyself perverse.” The Law of Christ, which deals with freedom and delight, they call bonds and a yoke, thinking it to be servitude and distress. On the other hand, their own law, which is truly servitude and infirmity, they believe to be liberty and easy to keep. To such an extent everything is evil to the ungodly. Thus Jer. 23:38–40: “Because you call this word a burden of the Lord, and I sent to you, saying: Do not call it a burden of the Lord, therefore behold, I will remove you and cast you away, and I will send you everlasting reproach.” It is unavoidable for those who are pleased with themselves to be displeased with the Lord.

Again the eyes of faith are necessary; for the prophet does not say this, as if he meant that they had truly understood the Lord and Christ when they said: “Let us break Their bonds in pieces.” They believed themselves to be working for God and His Law when they rejected Christ. But the prophet mentions the Lord and Christ, whom he describes as despised by those who knew no better. And I leave it to you whether or not he wanted to use an allegory throughout the verse in order to show that they pretended one thing and did another. In their blindness they performed a kind of allegorical work when they rejected the Lord and Christ, while pretending to do everything possible for them.

Could it not also be possible that the prophet used the pronoun “Their” as an understatement,⁴² so that he might both interpret and understand it as the “Lord and His Christ” for himself and at the same

time rebuke their great contempt, in which they do not consider Christ worthy of a name, much less acknowledge Him as Lord and Christ?

Therefore he has so far described their effort to keep Christ from being established as the King whom the Lord Himself already established. They plotted not only against Christ but even more against the order of God, just as we see in the case of David and Saul. David had been anointed king by divine command. However, Saul opposed God and David most stubbornly in this order and in a similar manner raged, talked, resolved, and plotted much against him. But just as he undertook it all in vain, so it was with the Jews and Gentiles against Christ, as now follows.

4. He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision.

This is a tautology or repetition, which is frequently found in the Scriptures. It makes the matter certain, as the holy patriarch Joseph declared when he said in his interpretation of Pharaoh's dream (Gen. 41:32): "And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass." Therefore "He laughs" and "He has them in derision" is the same thing repeated, so that there is no doubt that all of it will most certainly come to pass.

The good Spirit works for our comfort and consolation, namely, that we do not fall when under attack but rise to certain hope; for it will surely come and not delay (Hab. 2:3). Therefore although this repetition seems faulty and superfluous in human speech, it is very necessary in God's affairs, especially since, as the wise man says, hope deferred makes the heart sick (Prov. 13:12). And the true hope, I tell you, is that which labors under suffering and the cross. For all manner of delay is hard for those who are being trained in the sufferings of Christ. Therefore they need the strongest and surest promise of God to sustain them.

On the other hand, just as one cannot sufficiently comfort the afflicted with promises of good, so one cannot sufficiently instill terror in the foolish, hardened, and unbelieving with threats of evil. Therefore the tautology is necessary in this matter, so that through assured and emphatic threats they may be filled with terror. For just as some people have too much fear and too little hope and security, so others have too much security and hope and almost no fear, as in Ps. 13:3: "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Thus these must fear the Lord, and those must hope for His mercy, and on both sides there must be the right middle road, which is described thus (Ps. 147:11): "But the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His steadfast love." Therefore this was written for us, that through the patience and consolation of the Scriptures we might have hope (Rom. 15:4). For that which is written here concerning Christ is an example for all Christians. Anyone who wishes to be a sincere Christian, especially if he also teaches the Word of Christ, will suffer his Herods, Pilates, rulers, kings, Gentiles, and other people who rage against him, meditate vain things, set themselves against him, and take counsel together. And if this does not happen through men, it will surely happen through devils and finally at all events through conscience itself in death. Then it is necessary to remember these and similar consolations: "He who sits in heaven laughs at them, and the Lord has them in derision," and to hold fast to this hope and let nothing cause you to waver.

In order to strengthen the assurance of the afflicted he says emphatically: "He will laugh and scorn," as if he were saying: So certain it is that they struggle in vain, however solid their cause may be in the opinion of others, that the Lord does not consider it worthwhile to resist them seriously or as if it were a great thing. He laughs at and scorns them as being absolutely nothing. Ps. 37:12-13 speaks in the same way: "The wicked plots against the righteous, and gnashes his teeth at him; but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for He sees that his day is coming." Thus we see that our adversaries should not only be humbled but should also be scorned. Oh, how much strength of faith is demanded by these words! For who has sensed laughter of God in the Passion of Christ and the triumph of the Jews? And when do we in our oppression believe that God laughs at our adversaries, when it seems to us that we are ridiculed and overpowered by both God and man?

However, as I have said, this is the divine derision, that He made the Jews and Gentiles who killed Christ a mockery before all the earth when He raised Christ from the dead. And when there was no hope that the kingdom of Christ could extend over even one people, He let His eternal lordship flourish over all creatures. He turned their designs toward such a different outcome that we can sing (Ps. 113:4): "The Lord is high above all nations, and His glory above the heavens!" He is the same Lord who was humbled beneath all Jews, whose disgrace was lower than the earth. Therefore just as the suffering and

death of Christ is prophesied in the preceding verses, so in this verse His resurrection is foretold, although somewhat obscurely.

But what is the intent of this imagery: “He who dwells in heaven”? To strengthen our hope he represents God as both a quiet and a wonderfully hidden Judge. He who concerns Himself about us dwells there secure and calm; and if we are disturbed, He who cares for us is not disturbed. We are tossed about, but He is calm; He will not let the righteous be eternally restless. But this all takes place in such a hidden manner that you would not know it unless you were in heaven. You suffer on the earth, in the sea, and in all creatures. Everywhere and in all things you have no hope of help until by hope and faith you leap over everything and grasp Him who dwells in heaven. Then you also dwell in heaven, but through faith and hope. Here we must throw out the anchor of our heart in all tribulations. In this way the evils of the world will be not only light but even laughable.

5. Then He will speak to them in His wrath and terrify them in His fury.

What I have said about a tautology in the preceding verse holds true for this one as well. One cannot say enough to foolish people and despisers of God. The leviathan in Job 41:17–19 laughs at the quivering spear, looks on the hammer as straw, considers iron as chaff and bronze as rotten wood. An archer does not drive him away, stones from slings are turned from him like reeds, although here perhaps there does not seem to be a tautology.

But when did He speak to them in His anger, or what was His anger like? Certainly it was when He laughed at them, and this we shall understand if we know what it means to have God speak in His anger. Jer. 18:7 declares: “Suddenly I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it.” Therefore “speaking in anger” means to eradicate, destroy, and disperse, which is precisely what befell the Jews, who said (John 11:48, 50): “The Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation. It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, that the whole nation should not perish.” The Lord laughs at these vain plottings, while, according to Prov. 10:24, that which the ungodly fears actually happens to him. The Lord destroyed, erased, and dispersed the Jews through the Romans. Accordingly, it was the anger and wrath of God that was the force behind the Romans. As Is. 10:5–6 says: “Ah, Assyria, the rod of My anger, the staff of My fury! Against a godless nation [that is, the hypocrites and pretenders] and against the people of My wrath I command him.” In my judgment, these words are spoken expressly of the Roman legions. When He says: “I will command him,” it is the same as this verse: “He will speak to them”; for all things happen by the command and Word of God. “He spoke, and it came to be” (Ps. 33:9).

Therefore the words “He will speak” must be taken absolutely, in this sense: By His Word He will determine, command, and ordain in such a way that it is against them, not for them, and not in mercy but in anger. For He speaks also against the righteous and their children when He commands the cross and death to strike them, as in 2 Sam. 16:10: “The Lord commanded him to curse David,” but in compassion. The text will be clearer if the preposition “to” is changed to “against,” and the words “He will speak” to “He will command”: Then He will give commands against them in His anger.

Not only will He destroy and disperse them; but He will throw them into confusion, because He has destroyed them externally through strife and internally through fear. To be sure, He also frightens His children and sends them exceptionally great anxiety, even as He did to Christ in the garden; but He does so in compassion. But He transported the Jews into eternal terror by the first of their fears when they were ravaged and destroyed by the Romans. It is impossible for the ungodly not to experience eternal fear when he dies. It would have been a mild punishment indeed if they had only been devastated, but it is fearful that they were ravaged in severe anger. The most terrible thing, however, is that they were not only ravaged and destroyed in wrath but also thrown into fearful terror and through death have been cast into an eternal horror.

Behold now the catalog of the dreadful punishments that are prepared for the crucifiers of Christ. First of all, there is the loss of honor, on account of which they rage most against Christ. They are made ridiculous before God and everyone. Behold their disgrace everywhere, which is not an insignificant evil for a proud and envious people. Then there is the loss of all means of assistance. They are laid waste, exterminated, and destroyed, so that there is nothing of comfort left to them even for their bodies. And finally the greatest evil: that tribulation and anguish terrifies their souls with eternal fear.

Thus they are punished in their reputation, in material things, and in spiritual matters. They have neither creatures nor God favorably inclined toward them. I ask you, is there anyone who would not have pity on his enemies, who would not weep for them, who would not suffer all things for them, even from them, when he firmly believes that these intolerable evils are hanging over them? Next, observe the order of these evils.

First, they are ridiculed and scorned, for their honor is turned into greatest shame, and this is their highest possession. Then they are ravaged, robbed of their goods and paternal heritage, their second possession. Lastly, they are terrified by anxiety, when all hope and faith in the spirit, their inner and final possession, has been taken from them. They become like chaff before the wind.

And again you see the punishment of the ungodly described as fear and horror. For just as the rule of God is justice, peace, and security, so hell must be sin, fear, and horror.

6. I have been set as King by Him on Zion, His holy hill.

Here we have a change of person, for it is not David speaking of himself, but Christ. The Hebrew text, however, speaks in the person of the Father: "I have set, or appointed, My King on Zion, My holy hill." I do not think this matter is of such great importance that we should wage a life-and-death battle on account of some controversial word, since both interpretations are good, except that usually the Hebrew text is more fitting for Scriptural metaphor, which ascribes authority to the Father. Thus Ps. 110:1: "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at My right hand.'" And Ps. 89:27: "I will make Him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." Stapulensis thinks that one could say: "I have anointed My King," basing his conclusion on the word of the believers (Acts 4:27), where they say: "They were gathered together against Thy holy Child Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint."⁴³ However, one sees that the word "anointed" is not taken from this verse but rather from verse two, where they say: "against His Christ, that is, against His Anointed One," which they repeat in order to confirm it more strongly. "Truly," they say, "He is the Christ and the Anointed, whom Thou hast anointed," that is, made the Christ.

I say this according to my humble opinion. If the Hebrew text did not demand connecting "My holy one" with Mt. Zion, then it would not appear unsuitable to refer it to Christ. The meaning would be this: "I set My King on Mt. Zion—not any man, but Him who is My Holy One and who is anointed by Me with the Holy Spirit." For in the Scriptures Christ is called the Holy One of God and the Holy One of Israel, as in Ps. 16:10: "Nor wilt Thou give Thy Holy One to see corruption." and in Ps. 89:18: "For our shield belongs to the Lord, and to the Holy One of Israel, our King." But the Hebrew has, as I have said, "My holy mountain."

This, then, is the meaning: "They did not want Him to reign over them, and they conspired against Me and My King. But My counsel shall stand, and My will shall be done. Who will resist My countenance? They have killed Him, but I have set Him up as King; they have withdrawn from Him, but I have subjected to Him holy Mt. Zion and all the ends of the earth. Thus they are ridiculed and scorned and are publicly exposed as having plotted in vain."

This verse belongs to the general teaching about ambition and arrogance, which is most shamelessly dominant in the church of Christ today. Thus the apostle discusses it in Heb. 5:4–5: "And one does not take the honor upon himself; but he is called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not exalt Himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by Him who said to Him: 'Thou art My Son.'" And again (Ps. 110:1): "Sit at My right hand." This is what almost the whole psalm here impresses on us, showing that all that concerned Christ was ordained by the Father and was not assumed and sought by Christ Himself. But for many years now our decrees deal with scarcely anything else than dignity, power, and privileges; and that has a very strong smell of ambition, without any order or appointment by the Father.

The church of Christ is called "Mt. Zion" because it had its beginning there and was instituted through the sending of the Holy Spirit. And although it is bound to no particular place, yet it is necessary that it have its beginning at some definite location. From there it later spread over all the world, that the word of Christ might be fulfilled (John 4:21): "The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father." Thus today the church has no particular place and yet is everywhere. Similarly, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, the church of Jerusalem has preserved this modesty, so that it has never disputed with other churches about primacy and position, as the churches at Rome and Constantinople have endlessly and scandalously carried on their rivalry. Nevertheless, if any

church is to have primacy, the church at Jerusalem would have had to be considered as having precedence over any other by every right, since Christ Himself was its Bishop, its King, appointed by God the Father. Furthermore, the whole church had its origin there, and all churches were born there. Truly, it alone was the mother of all churches, since all the apostles and disciples were, so to speak, its clergy.⁴⁴ But God did not want this quarreling to happen. He showed us that this pretension to primacy is objectionable and that no other church should aspire to such a position, when He did not give this permission to a church that deserved it.

I do not speak thus because I condemn the hegemony of the Roman Church, but because I detest the extortion of it by force and fury, as if it were a precept of God, when it ought to be established through the mutual agreement of believers and the bonds of love. Certainly it should be a rule, not of domineering strength but of ministering love. I condemn the arrogance, but I commend the object. Gold is not evil, but the love of gold is evil; the flesh is not evil, but fleshly desires are evil. Nevertheless, Christ most vigilantly offers resistance by never permitting the Eastern churches to be subject to this church.

Therefore the church is called Mt. Zion according to the very common figure of synecdoche, naming the contents by the container, just as the “city of Jerusalem” is used for the people that inhabit the city. This is not the only reason, however; for in an allegory the name, the object, and the form are all combined. The name “Zion” means watchtower. Yet the church is called a watchtower, not only because it looks upon God and heavenly things through faith, from a distance—and because its members aspire to that which is above rather than to earthly things, but also because it contains the true observers and the watchful in spirit. It is their duty to be concerned about the people under them and to watch against the treachery of the enemies and sinners. Such men were called bishops in Greek, meaning watchmen, in the same way that it is possible to form “Zionites” from the Hebrew word.

The point is that Zion is a mountain. Thus, in the presence of God, the church is exalted to spiritual heights by reason of its virtues, gifts, graces, works, etc. By these God has exalted her over all power, knowledge, and human righteousness, as it is written in Is. 2:2 and Micah 4:1: “The mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills.” This I must interpret again for the benefit of the carnal dreamers, who always refer the Word of God to earthly display. The church is exalted over all the might and height of the earth, not through wealth or power but through faith, hope, love, and the virtues which despise worldly riches and power. For the fact that the church now ranks high in these things is not peculiar to the church but is really a strange leviathan.⁴⁵ For this reason the church has greatly declined in the wisdom of the Word of God, in holiness of life, in good works, etc. These are the mountains and the truest heights of the church of Christ, where the world cannot emulate her. In those other things she has already long surpassed the world—if one must call that a “church” that does such things; but it is certain that the true church of Christ always remains the same.

The form of Mt. Zion was such that it rose at the southern end and had beneath it the city of Jerusalem declining to the north and rising up toward it, as is written (Ps. 48:2): “Mt. Zion in the far north, the city of the great king.” This declining and rising can signify the internal struggle of Christ’s people, namely, between the flesh and the spirit: the flesh strives toward the north, and the spirit toward the south. Or these represent the two modes of this life, the active and the contemplative. The one sinks to provide temporal things for others; the other ascends to heavenly things and inclines toward the watchtower, where the watchmen are, completely superior in their life and speech, drawing others to themselves. Between the two is Mt. Moriah, the mountain of the temple. This is Christ, God and man, who embraces both and abides in both, just as Mt. Moriah, within Jerusalem under Mt. Zion, typifies. For it is Mt. Moriah, the Mount of Vision, on which Abraham offered his son and on which Solomon afterwards built his temple. Thus it is on Christ that we are sacrificed with Isaac, and it is on Him that we are built as the temple of God through the true Solomon; for Christ is our Mt. Moriah, because God neither sees nor recognizes anyone who is not sacrificed and built in this place, that is, on and in Christ, since the eyes of the Lord have regard for Him alone. Hence the mountain is called (Gen. 22:14) “The Lord will see forever.” However, the heretics and the proud set up other mountains of vision, or rather of blindness; for by their righteousness and works they want to merit the consideration of God.

He is called “holy,” not because of a figurative holiness of the Law or outward consecration; for the psalmist is speaking by the Spirit. Therefore he is not content to say “holy mountain” but adds “My,” as if to say: “It is holy through My holiness, not through that by which stones, wood, and walls are sanctified, but through that by which the mind and body are consecrated, namely, by an anointing with the grace of the Spirit, which purifies them through faith, hope, and charity from day to day.” For that is holy which is separated from profane use and is consecrated only for sacred and divine service. This is accomplished ceremonially and literally through human priests, but truly and spiritually when the Holy Spirit has been poured into our hearts (Rom. 5:5).

In all these ways He clearly distinguishes the rule of Christ from the rule of all other kings. Only of this King does He proclaim: “I have established Him” or “I am established.” This personal pronoun indicates a spiritual Founder, because God is invisible and completely spiritual. He does not appoint the others by Himself, immediately; but He appoints men through men, the visible through the visible. Hence the rule of Christ is not of this earth but in spirit and in truth. Similarly, “My King” does not mean a king of men or one whom men set up. Christ is King in the spirit and before God. Although He is set over Mt. Zion, nevertheless there is added: “My holy,” or “His holy,” so that the reign of Christ is understood to be a people in Zion, but such a people as is holy with a spiritual holiness. Again, you see that the church of Christ does not consist of worldly power, wisdom, or honor, even though there are those who babble that there are no Christians outside the “new monarchy”;⁴⁶ for the power of a monarchy has no relation to spiritual holiness.

7. In proclaiming His commandment.

The Hebrew text begins the seventh verse in this way: “I will tell the decree of God. The Lord said to Me: ‘Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee.’ ” In my opinion the connection has the effect that we know what decree is to be understood. What He will speak about is what He now adds: “The Lord said to Me: ‘Thou art My Son.’ ” “This,” He said, “I have as a commandment, and for this I have been made King, that I should proclaim to all that I am the Son of God; for I must glorify the Father.” Truly, the object of the whole Gospel is to know Christ as the Son of God, as it is written in Matt. 16:15–16: “Who do you say that I am? Peter replied: ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ ” On this rock the church is built. Thus Paul said (1 Cor. 1:23–24): “But we preach Christ, the Power and Wisdom of God.” And He Himself does nothing throughout the whole Gospel of John but show Himself as the Son of God, always preaching that God is His Father. In His Passion this was also charged against Him as a crime worthy of death. Christ came to plant the faith by which one believes in Him as the Son of God. Moreover, this faith is the fulfillment of all the Law, the righteousness for all time, the magnificent work of God, the mortification of the flesh, the reviving of the spirit, the victory over the world, over the flesh, and over hell, as He says (Matt. 16:18): “And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” In short, He is all in all. Thus He says (John 8:24): “For you will die in your sins, unless you believe that I am He.” And again (John 11:26): “Whosoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.” Therefore the letters of the apostles are filled with the doctrine of faith, which is eternal life itself, as it is written in John 3:36: “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him.” And again (John 12:49–50): “For I have not spoken on My own authority; the Father who sent Me has Himself given Me commandment what to say and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has bidden Me.” Therefore it is clear that He has preached the decree of God, namely, the decree of faith in Him as the Son of God, for the salvation of all who receive Him, who believe in His name.

But you will say: If the Spirit wanted this, why did He not arrange the words more clearly, in this fashion: “I will proclaim the decree of God, that I am His Son; today He has begotten Me”? In reply let me say that everywhere the Holy Spirit follows the same method that He observes throughout the Gospel of John. Whenever He speaks of His divinity, He always appeals to the authority of the Father; and all that He Himself is He refers to the Father. He says (John 12:49): “I have not spoken on My own authority”; again (John 7:16): “My teaching is not Mine”; and again (John 14:10): “The Father who dwells in Me does His works”; and many other statements. In this verse, when He says He will proclaim the decree of the Father that He is the Son of God, He first introduces the Father who speaks to Him, so that we hear the Father in the Son, speaking about the Son, rather than the Son speaking about Himself. This is the meaning: “I will proclaim the decree of God, that I am the Son of God. But I will not do this

by My own authority, lest I appear to be boasting. On the contrary, what the Father has said about Me I will proclaim to you. Then you will hear Him speaking of Me who has commanded Me to proclaim what He has said to Me, so that through His authority you will believe what I say about Myself.”

And note: This change of persons—now the Father, now the Son who quotes the word of the Father about Himself—is venerable and holy; for it commends to us the divine nature and equality more emphatically than I, impure as I am, would dare enlarge on it. In fact, this psalm is one of the most important psalms in the whole Psalter. It is sufficient that, on the authority of the apostle Paul, this verse speaks of the begetting of the Godhead, since he says (Heb. 1:5): “For to what angel did God ever say: ‘Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee’?”

Everyone will now see this for himself, that the words of the Father describe the only-begotten Son. He says: “He has said to Me,” namely, to one, not to many: “Thou art My Son.” He is unique, unmistakably distinguished by such special signs as the Son above all others, of whom Ps. 89:6 declares: “Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord?” It is as if he said: There are many sons of God, but among them there is only one who is God. Who is like Him? Again: “I have begotten Thee,” I alone Thee alone.

And how carefully and worthily the holy fathers have interpreted these words: “Today I have begotten Thee,” i.e., in eternity!⁴⁷ Eternity means that He has been begotten, is being begotten, and will be begotten without end. To Him being a Son means that He is born of the Father. There is neither beginning nor end to His birth, but He is continually begotten by an ever-present nativity. Rightly He is said to be begotten “today,” that is, always being begotten. For this “today” has neither yesterday nor tomorrow but is always from day to day, as He says (John 8:58): “Before Abraham was, I am.”

Where are you now, you miserable and ambitious people, who, in your ambition, either seek the offices of this King in the church or uselessly hold them, who do not proclaim the decree of God and do not preach Jesus Christ crucified, the Son of God, for the salvation of believers but collect treasures, abound in pleasures, and indulge in every possible pomp? This Son of God, who as man was appointed King, does not seek His own; He proclaims the decree of God. He did not accept the Kingdom for Himself, but for the blessedness of others, to the glory of God.

Yet the ministry of the Word, which is the only office the bishops really have, is the office they neglect most. And if there are any others who preach in their stead, they preach neither the Lord's decree nor Christ, but their own fables; or at best they preach the laws and traditions of men. Therefore you should not believe that the church, the holy mountain of God, is present anywhere where Christ does not teach Christ in the purest manner. For the import of these words is great, when He says: “I will proclaim the decree of God.” “Of God,” He says, not the decrees, counsels, or histories of mere “And I Myself will proclaim it”; for unless Christ speaks in us, we shall never proclaim God's decree. “I,” He said (Ex. 4:12), “will be in your mouth”; and (Ps. 81:10): “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.”

Therefore our translation does not conflict in meaning with the Hebrew, except that the different division tends to clarify the meaning. Then having this variation will do no harm if you know the proper meaning. Therefore I do not wish to quarrel about it.

This verse, therefore, distinguishes the kind of doctrine taught in the New Testament from that which was taught in the Old Testament. Formerly the Law was taught, which produced wrath and increased sin; but now it is faith, which works remission and fulfills righteousness. There the lawgiver was Moses, a man and a servant; here the Lawgiver is Christ, God and Lord of all. The former produced servants of sin; the latter, free men of righteousness.

Not that the Law should not be taught now too. Christ says (Matt. 13:52) that both ought to be taught by a teacher learned in the kingdom of heaven, the old as well as the new. But the message of grace is characteristic of the New Testament, and that of the Law is characteristic of the Old Testament. There is no one in this life in whom all the completeness of the New Testament has been fulfilled; nor will anyone be found in whom some part of the Old Testament does not remain. For this life is a kind of transition and passage from Law to grace, from sin to justification, from Moses to Christ. But its consummation is the future resurrection.

8. Ask of Me, and I will make the nations Thy heritage and the ends of the earth Thy possession.

This verse, too, belongs to the decree which Christ took upon Himself to proclaim by command of the Father. He says: “The Lord has spoken to Me. The Father has commanded Me to demand the nations

from Him as My heritage. And I will proclaim this decree of His, that you may believe and know that I have been established not only as ruler over Zion, His holy mountain, that is, over the people of Israel, but also as heir and Lord of all. Whoever hears this commandment of God from Me and believes, will come to the Father through Me and be saved.”

Again you see that the rule of Christ is not one which He has arrogantly assumed, but that it was established by the command and the authority of the Father. Thus the ambitious not only lack example or precedent, but their vice should be checked by divine authority. Not even this, however, is enough for this great abomination. Christ, the Lord of all, does not act or do anything in the church without the commandment of God, and yet these little human worms attempt and dare everything through their own temerity in the church, which is not even theirs!

What does it mean that, on being set as King upon Mt. Zion, He is not commanded to ask for the kingdom of Mt. Zion, while His inheritance over the Gentiles is promised only upon His request—in fact, He is commanded to ask for it?

Perhaps because Israel was promised the blessing and rule of Christ in Abraham, while it was given to the Gentiles out of compassion, without the promise. It is written (Rom. 15:8–9): “For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promise given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy.” The truth was shown to the Jews, and the promise was fulfilled; but free compassion was imparted to the Gentiles. Therefore compassion and truth are usually connected in the prophets,⁴⁸ although it was by free mercy that He deigned to give the promise.

Thus Zion is given to Christ to rule without His demand; but the nations are given to Him as a heritage at His request, as a gift of Christ, since they had been promised nothing. Is. 66:19–20 says: “They shall declare My glory among the nations. And they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as an offering to the Lord.” Thus Israel is the country, and we Gentiles are the gift, like the dowry which Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, gave his daughter (1 Kings 9:16). When Christ is set up as King over Zion, the prophet uses the language of the present, to show that the event itself takes place. But when He is announced as the heir, He is first ordered to demand the heritage, and it is promised to Him in the future. We see all this fulfilled in the Acts of the Apostles, where the disciples did not preach the Word except to the Jews, until Paul was called by heaven and sent as apostle to the Gentiles. Therefore Christ, already King over Zion on earth, makes His request; and even while reigning in heaven He receives the Gentiles, who were promised to Him on His demand.

Yet here the psalmist has said “from Me” for a special purpose, to show that this sovereignty and inheritance of the Gentiles was given to Christ, not by men or in a human manner but by God, that is, spiritually.

This is one of the passages brazenly flouted by those who claim that anyone not subject to the pope of Rome is not a Christian. For they attempt to make God the Father a liar, since He has subjected the ends of the earth to Christ, while they themselves have not yet completely subjected all Europe. Or can there be no Christians where the Turks and the Scythians rule temporarily? How, then, could there be Christians in Rome under Nero and Domitian? Are there no bishops where they do not buy vestments, or priests where they do not pay the annates?⁴⁹ Are they not much rather bishops, the more they are free from wealth, pride, and pomp as they teach the Word of God and rule the people of Christ? Certainly in Acts 20:28 the apostle Paul gives a definition of a bishop as one who attends the flock and guides the church of God. He says: “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church.” Yet he was speaking to the elders, as blessed Jerome clearly gathers from the text, and this is indicated by the cognate word “tend.”⁵⁰ But to guide the church and tend the flock, can this be done except through the ministry of the Word and through prayer, without the commotion of the bishops which we have now? Lest we, therefore, limit the heritage of Christ too closely, let us not charge the psalm with falsehood, neither on account of the perfidy of the Turks nor because of the many others who have strayed away! Besides, which of us can know who is truly a Christian? And do not wicked people abound among us, while the good are few? The authority of the divine Word transcends our ability to comprehend it. How much more, then, does it transcend our suspicions and our phantasies, which occupy themselves with outward custom!

Blessed Augustine thinks that there is a tautology here.⁵¹ Clearly “the nations Thy heritage” means the same as “the ends of the earth Thy possession.” This tautology, as I have said, is always an indication of the certainty through which our faith is further strengthened, namely, that there are Christians also in other parts of the world, where the other apostles have preached, no matter to how great an extent iniquity rules there.⁵²

9. *Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.*

Again, the worldly ideas of man must be laid aside, lest someone imagine the reign of Christ to be founded or maintained by sword and weapons. For it is written (Ps. 147:10): “His delight is not in the strength of the horses, nor His pleasure in the legs of a man,” and the apostle has said (2 Cor. 10:14): “For the weapons of our warfare are not worldly.” Even the Turks, whom today we seek to overcome only by the sword, ought to be conquered by increasing the number of Christians among them.⁵³ Otherwise, why not use the sword on the wicked people in our own midst, especially the important ones among the people? God forbid! The rule of Christ consists in justice, truth, and peace. Through these it was set up, and through them it will be maintained. Hence when he said above that He was appointed King, he meant absolutely no other office than the office of the Word. He said: “I will preach the decrees of the Lord,” not: I will ride fine horses; or: I will devastate towns; or: I will seek the treasures of the earth; but this alone: I will preach what God has commanded, that is, Christ, God and man. This Paul calls the Gospel (Rom. 1:1–2): “Set apart for the Gospel of God, which He promised beforehand, through His Son.”

You see, however, that this verse, too, is wholly allegorical, and not without reason, since it signifies an allegory which comes to pass in reality and in life itself. For since the Word of Christ is the Word of salvation and peace, the Word of life and grace, and since it works not in the flesh but in the spirit, it must suppress and cast out the salvation, peace, life, and grace of the flesh. When it does this, it appears to the flesh harder and more cruel than iron itself. For whenever a carnal man is touched in a wholesome way by the Word of God, one thing is felt, but another actually happens. Thus it is written (1 Sam. 2:6–7): “The Lord kills and brings to life; He brings down to hell and raises up; He brings low, He also exalts.” Isaiah also beautifully portrays this allegorical working of God when he says (28:21): “He does His work—strange is His deed; and He works His work—alien is His work!” It is as if he were saying: Although He is the God of life and salvation and this is His proper work, yet, in order to accomplish this, He kills and destroys. These works are alien to Him, but through them He accomplishes His proper work. For He kills our will that His may be established in us. He subdues the flesh and its lusts that the spirit and its desires may come to life.

This is what He said previously without allegory: “I will preach the decree of the Lord.” For the spirit accepts the Word of the Lord as a most pleasant command. Then the holy Mt. Zion becomes His kingdom, the Gentiles His heritage, and the ends of the earth His possession. But the flesh endures the commandment or Word of God with the greatest aversion; nor does it recognize it, since it is completely contrary to it in every way. It takes the Word as a rod and an iron, something which shatters. And so the allegory is fulfilled, as this verse signifies, and as it is demonstrated in action.

“Thou shalt break them” is **וְשָׁבַרְתָּם** in Hebrew. St. Jerome translates: “Thou shalt tend them.” However, John Reuchlin presents many meanings of this word in his *First Principles*, namely, to feed, guide, destroy, afflict, shake, shatter or break in pieces, and consume.⁵⁴ This last meaning, in my humble opinion, is the most appropriate of all in this passage. First, because the rod of iron, as everyone knows, is more suitable for breaking and shattering than for feeding and guiding. Secondly, it would have been sufficient for ruling to mention a scepter; but it would not be apt to speak of feeding with either a rod or a sword. Moreover, what is done with the rod of iron except destruction and shattering? As in Dan. 2:40: “Like iron which crushes, it shall break and crush all these.” Besides, this beautifully rounds out the tautology; for “Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” follows, so that “shatter” matches “guide” or “tend.” Both words signify the humbling of the proud through the Word of God, which shatters and destroys when it terrifies and humbles. Thus Rom. 1:18 declares that the coming wrath of God is revealed from heaven through the Gospel. And so spoke those who had been converted by the word of Peter and touched in their hearts (Acts 2:37): “Brethren, what shall we do?” This is what the Scriptures elsewhere call denunciations, shaking of the universe, and tremors of the earth. Most beautifully of all He says in Micah 4:13: “Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion, for I will make your

horn iron and your hoofs bronze; you shall beat in pieces many peoples and shall devote their gain to the Lord [that is, themselves, who are taken from the devil like prey], their wealth to the Lord of the whole earth." Behold what it means to rule them with a rod of iron, namely, as He says here, to crush many peoples with a horn of iron.

Therefore the rod is the most holy Gospel of Christ, for it is the scepter of His kingdom, as Ps. 45:6 says: "Thy royal scepter is a scepter of equity." And Ps. 110:2: "The Lord sends forth from Zion Thy mighty scepter." Thus Is. 11:4: "He shall smite the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked." What is the rod of Christ's mouth, if not the Word of God, with Which He consumes the earth, that is, those who are earthly minded? What is the breath of His lips, if not the same Word of the Spirit, which destroys the ungodly that he may live for piety after dying to wickedness? This is the rod before whose tip, in the hand of Joseph, Jacob bowed (Gen. 47:31)⁵⁵ and whose point the blessed Esther kissed (Esther 5:2.).

It is called a scepter in a metaphorical or rather an allegorical sense, first of all because it is slender and easily handled, and can be carried about in the hand; for the yoke of Christ is easy, and His burden is light (Matt. 11:30). The hands of Moses, however, are heavy (Ex. 17:12), so that they have to be held up by stones placed under them by Aaron and Hur. This is, as Peter explains it (Acts 15:10), the unbearable burden of the Law. By contrast, the hand of Christ everywhere in the Gospel was laid on the little children and the sick to make them well. However, Moses has two great stones and heavy tablets. Furthermore, in the past the Levites carried many large tablets of the tabernacles, of which Num. 4:31, says: "These are their burdens." These were truly heavy and many burdens if they are regarded alone, but they are nothing or surely moderate if you consider today's tyranny of church law and justice. For today we do not carry tablets, but entire forests and cliffs and the hands of the bishops, which are so heavy that the whole world would not be able to carry them. Yet it serves us right, because we have rejected the scepter of Christ. Therefore what Is. 8:6–7 prophesied has happened to us: "Because these people have refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, therefore behold the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many."

Secondly, it is called a scepter because it is straight. For the Gospel and the Law of the Spirit lead to life by a straight and direct way. But the Law of the letter leads us through long detours of symbols and works, as through the most tedious wilderness. Its wanderings scarcely lead to the plains of Moab (Ex. 13:18) or to the Promised Land, but fail with Moses (Deut. 34:1 ff.).

Thirdly, it is called a scepter because the Law of Christ is bare and uncovered, like a scepter that is carried without a covering. The Law of Moses was carded in an ark, with the tablets obscured by a dark veil (Ex. 40:20), because every Law and every deed without the Law of Christ is a shadow and the sign of a hidden righteousness, but not the genuine thing, which is revealed through the Law of Christ. Rom. 1:17 says: "The righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel through faith for faith."

The scepter is called "iron," first, as I have said, on account of the flesh, to which the Law of Christ is most severe, although to the spirit it is very gentle. For on all lusts it places cross and death—poverty, humility, and patience. These are the three ends of the cross: poverty destroys the lust of the eyes and avarice; humility destroys the pride of life and ambition; and patience destroys lust of the flesh and sensual pleasures (1 John 2:16). Thus Isaiah (27:1) calls it a hard and strong sword: "In that day the Lord with His hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan, the fleeing serpent."

Secondly, it is called iron because of its inflexible and invincible straightness, or, as blessed Augustine has observed, its inflexible righteousness.⁵⁶ For however many have tried to twist and bend the Word of God to their own interpretation, it has remained invincibly straight, convicting as liars those who have distorted it. For it is not a reed like the staff of the Egyptians (2 Kings 18:21; Is. 36:6), which will penetrate and pierce the hand of him who leans on it. The reed is human doctrine, blown back and forth by every wind of opinion (Matt. 11:7). And this voice of one crying in the desert, since it is not covered with soft clothes, is not an empty reed moved by the wind but is full and strong and made of iron. However, when some ascribe to the Scriptures the flexibility of a waxen nose and say that it is like a bending reed, this is due to the work of those who misuse the holy Word of God for their incompetent and unstable opinions and glosses. They reach the point where the Word of God, which is fitting for everything, fits nothing.

Thirdly, just as iron crushes and breaks all things, as Dan. 2:40 says, so the Word of Christ does all this: it crushes the great, that is, humbles the proud; it straightens the crooked, that is, corrects the disorderly; it bends the straight, that is, bows down the exalted; it levels the rough, that is, soothes the angry; it extends the short, that is, encourages the timid; it shortens the long, that is, terrifies the presumptuous; it widens the narrow, that is, makes the stingy generous; it narrows the wide, that is, makes the spendthrift economical; it sharpens the blunt, that is, gives knowledge to the unlearned; it blunts the sharp, that is, makes the wise ignorant; and it repels rust, that is, banishes laziness. In short, it destroys every faulty form and changes it into one that is pleasing to God. And, as the apostle says (2 Tim. 3:16–17): “All Scripture has been inspired by God and made profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

“Like a potter’s vessel.” He blends a parable with the allegory, to clarify the meaning. In 2 Cor. 4:7 the apostle uses the allegory of “clay vessels” for the body, in fact, for the man in the body. He says: “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.” These are those earthen jars of Gideon (Judg. 7:16–21). When they were dashed in pieces and broken at the sound of the trumpets, they were burning; and their light pursued and routed the confused Midianites. That is, the bodies of the martyrs and saints, broken by various sufferings of the cross, have taught the world by their examples of charity and truth, and have routed the ungodly with their wickedness. And by tropology,⁵⁷ when the body or the man of flesh is broken by the Word of the cross and the rod of iron, the multitude of vices and lusts goes down in defeat before the virtues and the grace that illuminates the man.

In this place one must look at the simile, not at the thing itself. For Christ does not break and shatter His own by tearing the limbs from their bodies, as shattered vessels are separated into many little pieces; but this physical scattering is likened to a spiritual scattering. That is, the limbs of the body are not torn from one another in a physical sense; they are destroyed in their evil desires and actions. The tongue does not speak what is pleasant to the flesh; the ear does not listen to slander; the eye does not look at shameful things; and the hand does not take that which is another’s or busy itself with the illicit. In general, the sinful body, which formerly used its members for its own lusts, is now suddenly robbed of these members; for they have been shattered through the Word of God and deposed from this service. It is as though Babylon were blessed. As the apostle says (Rom. 6:19), the members, which formerly were made to serve impurity and moved from one injustice to another, now are made to serve righteousness and become sanctified. So also in the Gospel (Luke 11:22) the stronger man not only takes away the armor but divides the spoils as well. For according to Reuchlin, the Hebrew word **נִפְצָלָם** means: “Thou shalt disperse, dissipate, and scatter them.”⁵⁸

Therefore the “potter’s vessels” are all the Christians; first of all, because the clay vessel is easily broken. Thus mild men, who are not made obstinate by a hardened unbelief, easily yield to the Word of God and do not oppose or resist it. However, those who are stubborn, as they are called in Prov. 28:14, will fall into evil and will undoubtedly be overturned like the mountains and shattered like the rocks, as Elijah saw (1 Kings 19:11).

Secondly, it signifies the Christian, because a broken vessel is absolutely useless for its previous function. Thus you see the words of Is. 30:14 fulfilled: “Among its fragments not a piece is found with which to take fire from the hearth or to dip up water out of the well.” He is speaking of a large earthen jar which can only be shattered by a strong blow, and it agrees with this verse almost word for word. Thus an ungodly person who is converted and changed through Christ is made useless for his earlier life. With the apostle (Gal. 6:14) he says: “The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

10. Now, therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, you who judge the earth.

The Latin text has translated literally: “You who judge the earth” instead of “Judges of the earth.” However, it has not translated literally when it says “kings” instead of “you who rule.” But this is of no consequence.

After the rule of Christ has been described, he adds a holy, true, and learned exhortation, seeking and trying everything to subject all men to Christ, especially the more important men.

But how daring and, as we are accustomed to say today, how seditious and scandalous is this most impudent prophet, who lifts up his mouth to heaven! He has the audacity to confront, not the lowly and

common people but the highest rulers and even kings, and to teach those who are inflated with the title and office of teacher of the people. These are secure in the customary honor they expect, and cannot stand this greatest of insults, that they are foolish and ignorant, and must be taught and educated. It is simple to have the unlearned people as pupils, for they are used to being students. But to take kings, judges of the earth, masters, governors, doctors, and bishops, and not only rank them on a level with the people and place them in the class of students after they have been used to teaching and ruling, but also to pass the people by and require them alone to be students—who, I ask, could stand that? Who would not tremble here with John the Baptist to touch the head of Christ (Matt. 3:14 ff.)? Yet it must be touched and baptized with the Water of the Jordan in its descending lowliness, so that all righteousness may be fulfilled, as He who is highest humbles Himself under the lowest and the lowest trembles before the humility of the highest.

Truly the good and worthy Spirit, knowing that the whole welfare of the common people depends on the right instruction of the leaders, teaches them first in a friendly and fatherly way, so that they yield to His mind and are all the more ready to be instructed; for they do not direct their own affairs but the matters of all those under them, and they cannot make mistakes without harming the whole people. As it is written (Luke 6:39): “A blind man leads a blind man, and both fall into a pit.” Christ admonishes them not only for this reason but because He knows, as I have said, that they are inflated by their power and office, and always have in their mouth the words of John 9:34: “Would You teach us?” and of Jer. 18:18: “For the Law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet.” Inflated by this bombast and self-confidence, they were wont to resist the true prophets. And this is no different from the way the flatterers of the popes today resist all truth with their chatter that it is unthinkable for so high a personage to err, and that the church cannot err, the pope cannot err, a council cannot err, etc. Yet the people in the Old Testament were more strongly bound to obey the priests than we Christians are, because they had to listen to the Levite priests under pain of death. Today, however, we all are priests, and Is. 54:13 is now fulfilled: “All your sons shall be taught by the Lord,” and Jer. 31:34: “No longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother saying, ‘Know the Lord’; for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.” In 1 Cor. 14:30 Paul clearly teaches that if a revelation is made to one who is sitting by, the first speaker should be silent. In the New Testament, therefore, all superiors are to be heard in such a way that everyone of the lowest degree may be free to judge the thought of the superior in matters of faith, much more so than the prophets could resist the important people in Israel without regard for the command of God. For in the synagog, where the priesthood worked only with outward ceremonies, any kind of error by the priests went unchallenged. However, in the church, where things of the spirit and faith are involved, it is absolutely the concern of everyone to see that the priest does not err. For it is the custom of God to reveal to the lowest that which He does not deign to show even to the highest, so that His reign may stand firmly in the humility on which alone it rests.

Observe the emphasis on the adverb “now.” “Now,” I say, after Christ has been established as King of all. In these times there are two things which will hinder you most from knowing what is right.

First, this Christ—who was crucified, killed, and condemned by you, and on God’s authority was even cursed according to the Law of Moses—is proclaimed as Lord over all lords. It is most difficult of all to recognize as King one who has died such a desperate and shameful death. The senses are strongly repelled by such a notion, reason abhors it, experience denies it, and a precedent is lacking. Plainly this will be folly to the Gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23) unless you raise your thoughts above all this.

The second difficulty is that through His reign this King teaches that all the things you hoped for in the Law should be condemned, and that all the things you feared should be loved. He offers the cross and death. He advises contempt for the good that one sees, and likewise for the evil, since He will confer on you a much different good, namely, that which the eye has not seen, the ear has not heard, and has not entered into the heart of man (1 Cor. 2:9). You must die if you would live under this King. You must bear the cross and the hatred of the whole world. You must not flee from ignominy, poverty, hunger, and thirst, in other words, all the evil that floods the earth. For this is the King who became a fool to the earth and died, and who thereupon destroys His own with a scepter of iron and smashes them like a potter’s vessel. How can anyone stand such a King if he relies on his own senses, defines things

rationally, and stands in the doorway of his tents and cannot see the face of Moses (Ex. 33:7–10)? Therefore instruction and training are necessary, that you may rise above this, regard the visible things with contempt, and be drawn to the invisible, as you aspire, not to that which is on the earth but to that which is above, where Christ is (Col. 3:1–2).

Therefore in Hebrew the word for “be wise” is *הַשְׁכִּילֶךָ*, which by itself means: “Make sensible,” referring either to yourselves, as Jerome interpreted it,⁵⁹ or to others. That is, so work and strive for this wisdom that you become wise and understand spiritual and heavenly things; or, as we say in our vernacular: “Be wise and understanding.”⁶⁰ This is like the thought of Ps. 32:9: “Be not like a horse or a mule without understanding.” However, this is not the wisdom for which the philosophers seek; it is faith itself, which in prosperity or adversity can see things that are not seen. Therefore he does not show wherein they should be instructed; but he says absolutely: “Be wise,” that is, take heed that you are wise, be concerned that you believe. That which is understood by faith has neither name nor category. Prosperity or adversity in matters of this present life completely upsets every man who does not by faith understand the invisible. This knowledge comes from faith, as it is written (Is. 7:9): “If you do not believe, you will not understand.” And this is the entrance into darkness, where everything that the feeling, reason, mind, and understanding of man is able to grasp will be dissolved. Faith unites the soul with the invisible, ineffable, unutterable, eternal, unthinkable Word of God, while at the same time it separates it from all visible things. This is the cross and the Passover of the Lord, in which He preaches this necessary comprehension.

“Receive instruction, O rulers of the earth.” Augustine understands this as tautology.⁶¹ However, these words, “receive instruction,” have an absolute meaning: Strive to be instructed, that is, torn away from the raw and natural inclinations and opinions of the senses and sensual things, so that you do not think childishly about Christ and His kingdom. “The sensual man does not perceive those things that are of the spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:14). However, it appears to me that instruction means turning the heart away from transitory things, just as understanding means turning to and grasping that which is eternal. One is done by the cross through the death of the flesh; the other, by faith through the awakening of the spirit.

It is too well known for special mention that “the earth” symbolizes the men on the earth, except that Augustine, preferring to take it as a tropology, thinks that it signifies the body.⁶²

11. *Serve the Lord with fear, and glorify Him with trembling.*

This is an amazing expression, unreasonable to our eyes. For fear works hatred and flight, not service; and trembling is violently opposed to joy. Then here he is saying the opposite of another psalm, where we are told to serve the Lord in gladness (Ps. 100:2). What, then? Let us let the apostle Paul decide. He says (1 Cor. 1:21): “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” It is as if he wanted to say: One must become wise through foolishness. Thus, since we neither acknowledged nor praised God as our Benefactor in peace and prosperity, as we should have done, it has pleased Him that now we should acknowledge and praise Him through the cross and adversity. We did not serve God with gladness in security, and so He is pleased that we serve Him with gladness in fear and rejoice with trembling. In short, just as the world upsets everything that is God’s, so God upsets everything that is the world’s. All creation has been given to lift up and enlighten man, but man uses it to blind and cripple himself. Therefore God, in turn, also uses all creation to blind and cripple man. This is the cross of Christ and the foolishness of preaching by which He saves the believers. Those who follow opinion, reason, wisdom, and knowledge are offended by all this and perish.

This, then, is the meaning: When Christ the Lord reigns with His iron scepter and crushes the old man through the Word of the cross, according to the will and command of the Father, who has subjected everything to Him, you must recognize yourself as subjected to Him. However, you are subjected in fear, that you may bear His cross in patience and humility. And be concerned, lest, if you refuse to bear His hand and counsel, you become wicked, like those spoken of in Ps. 78:9: “The sons of Ephraim are turned back on the day of battle.” You will be subject when you know that you never suffer undeserved punishment but deserve much greater punishment. The proud are smug in their opinion that they deserve only blessing. Like Job, they are not afraid, because they rely on their works (Job 9:28). Therefore they do not stand in the time of trial; but, as Matt. 7:24 ff. said about the house of the foolish man that was

built on sand, they collapse in a great fall and become worse. Accordingly, this fear is a great part of the cross in the whole of life and in all our works; in fact, it is almost the whole of the cross.

Surely we should, with the apostle in Rom. 5:3, glory in our tribulation and rejoice with trembling. From all this it can be inferred that the service and praise of God is twofold. There is a service in security and a joy in the Lord without fear. This exists among the smug hypocrites. They are pleased with themselves. They do not see themselves as worthless servants, for they have great merit. Of them it is written in Ps. 10:5: “Thy judgments are on high, out of his sight,” and then soon after (Ps. 36:21): “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”⁶³ They always perform righteousness without judgment. They will not permit Christ to be Judge, before whom all should tremble and in whose sight no living man is justified (Ps. 143:2).

Service with fear and joy with trembling is found in the righteous, who always do righteousness and judgment. They mingle them together. They are neither without judgment, which terrifies the righteous and makes them despair of their own works, nor without true righteousness, by which they trust and rejoice in the mercy of God. The occupation of their whole life is to accuse themselves in all matters, to justify and praise God in all things, and thus to fulfill Prov. 28:14: “Blessed is the man who is always fearful,” and likewise 1 Thess. 5:16: “Always rejoice in the Lord.” Thus they are crushed and humbled between the upper and lower millstone (Deut. 24:6); and after the husks are removed, they become the purest wheat of Christ.

I leave it to you to pay special attention to the emphasis with which he says: “Serve the Lord,” not yourself, your belly, or your gold, not even your righteousness, strength, wisdom or any other thing at all. For these are forms of idolatry. Thus you should rejoice in Him—not in yourselves or in any creature, but only in the Lord.

Now this happens when you claim nothing good in yourself which you may trust in and praise but attribute all things only to God, and praise, honor, and love Him in all things. And likewise you attribute to yourself all evil, because of which you should fear, tremble, and despair. Just as Job said of both sides (Job 1:21): “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

How difficult all this is you will see when you consider each side of the question. In adversity it is easy to abandon hope, complain, become impatient, and for fear of punishment disobey the commandments and prohibitions of God. It is hard to overcome your fear of creatures by the fear of God and not to yield to passions and circumstances, but to adhere to the Word of the Lord, even to the point of death. For here is the test to see whether one serves the Lord and fears the will of God more than the violence of any creature. Furthermore, the fear of God is in greater danger in prosperity than in adversity. For in prosperity one lives secure in joy; it is hard to fear, much less to tremble, when all goes well.

Therefore I hold that the prophet has very fittingly joined trembling with joy and fear with service; for service implies the burden of adversity, but joy the ease of prosperity. It was necessary to recommend fear that he might declare that trembling is necessary there, as if he would say: One must be more afraid where there seems to be no cause for fear; and the more smoothly everything proceeds, the more anxiously one should fear, and even tremble, when great joy and happiness befalls him.

12. *Embrace discipline, lest at any time the Lord be angry, and you perish from the just way.*

The words “Lord” and “just” do not occur in the Hebrew text, but this does not matter. However, this translation, “Embrace discipline,” is abandoned by almost everyone. In the Hebrew it is **וְשָׁקַן בֶּר**, which Jerome has translated in the Hebrew Psalter as “worship in a pure way,” because **בֶּר** also means “pure” and “chosen.” He says the same thing in his small commentary: “In the Hebrew one reads **וְשָׁקַן בֶּר**, which can be interpreted as: ‘Pray to the Son’; for **בֶּר** also means ‘son.’”⁶⁴ Thus “Simon Bar Jona” in the Gospel (Matt. 16:17) means “John’s son”; Bar Ptolemy means “the son of Ptolemy”; Barnabas means “the son of a prophet,” etc.

Burgensis and Lyra have “Kiss the Son.”⁶⁵ But nowhere is **בֶּר** used to mean “discipline.” However, to kiss they interpret as to give homage, so that it has this sense: Kiss the Son, that is, with reverence and humility accept Christ as King and Lord.

But let us attempt to harmonize everything as well as possible. First, the kiss is a sign of reverence and adoration, as when we honor and kiss sacred and divine things, or when in humble prostration we

kiss the feet and footsteps, as Mary Magdalene kissed Christ (Luke 7:38). Therefore Jerome has translated this phrase: “Worship in a pure way.”

Secondly, the kiss is a sign of recognition of faithfulness which one intends to perform, as in homage, where we are accustomed to kiss the hand and in this way to acknowledge him whom we kiss as lord.

Thirdly, it is a sign of the most perfect friendship and love that we are wont to kiss the eyes or the face, as the apostle teaches (Rom. 16:16): “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” We read that Christ customarily received His disciples with this kiss when they returned (Luke 7:45; Matt. 26:49). But since those who kiss in this manner customarily clasp and embrace each other, our translation has: “Embrace discipline.”

However, he says definitely: “Kiss the Son.” Since he does not mention feet, hand, or face, it is right to understand the kiss in its broadest meaning. Thus we may worship Christ as the Son of God and the true God by kissing His feet. By kissing His hand we accept Him as our rightful Lord, our eternal Helper and Savior. And by kissing His eyes and face we embrace Him as our most beloved Brother and Friend, and the Bridegroom of our soul. Concerning this threefold kiss read Bernard at the beginning of the Song of Songs, to find this interpretation:⁶⁶ “Kiss the Son,” that is, worship Christ as God with the greatest reverence; subject yourselves to Christ the Lord with the greatest humility; and cling to Christ, the Bridegroom, with the greatest love. Behold, love and fear, with humility as the measure and midpoint of both—this is the most perfect worship of God.

Now the various translations of כִּי—as “Son,” “pure,” or even “discipline”—can be brought into harmony by considering faith in Christ as our true discipline. Therefore whoever believes in Christ, that is, kisses the Son, has truly accepted discipline and carries the cross of Christ on himself, as is written to the Galatians (6:17). For Christ is not kissed or embraced according to the flesh but according to the spirit, that is, when we lovingly take upon ourselves the cross and His Passion, by which we are disciplined (Heb. 12:5–11). Therefore our translation is not accurate so far as the words are concerned, but it is completely suited to the sense. Furthermore, “to worship in a pure way” refers to what is written about the impure worship of Baal (1 Kings 19:18): “Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed his hand.” I will say in passing that “kissing his hand” is not in that text; but the same word, קָשַׁף, which is now established to mean “to kiss,” is used where it is said “that has not worshiped him.” Perhaps some Hebrew interpreter added the gloss “kissing his hand,” to express the mode of adoration better, and it was later put into the text by some inexperienced scribe. Yet Job speaks in this same manner (Job 31:27–28): “And my mouth has kissed my hand, which would be an iniquity to be punished by the judges; for I should have been false to God above.” Blessed Gregory interprets these Scriptural modes of expression to mean a man who trusts in his own works and glories in a righteousness which does not come from Christ but is produced through his own strength.⁶⁷ For such a man adores and kisses his own hand with his mouth, because he praises himself and is pleased with himself, and his soul is not praised in the Lord. Therefore such adoration is the greatest iniquity and a denial of the most high God, since the soul ascribes to itself what belongs to God and thus sets itself up as a Baal idol and worships itself. Furthermore, it makes itself the author of its own good; for Baal means an author or lord. So Is. 2:8, says: “They bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made.” But this is impure worship. Pure worship is to kiss Christ, to recognize Christ as Savior, and to kiss His hand. This is true and pure worship; this is to worship the Son. “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

Therefore let us conclude: The prophet desires that they serve Christ in fear, that they acknowledge themselves as sinners, always accuse themselves, and let God alone be righteous in Christ. But since they are able to oppose Him and pretend to have kept the Law, to be righteous, not to have sinned, and not to need Christ for their righteousness, he opposes this most wicked arrogance and says: “Do not think that you are righteous; empty yourselves of this idolatrous opinion, lest you make yourselves equal to God. Do not trust in your own righteousness, but rather kiss the Son and embrace Him; for His hands, His justice, and His salvation will save you. And if you do not do this, He will be angry at your righteousness, and you will perish from your way; or (as I imagine) you will perish with your way.” For the Hebrew is somewhat obscure in meaning: וְתִאָּכְדוּן בְּדֶרֶךְ, that is, “you will perish in the way,”

which, by contraction, seems to me to say: You will perish with the way, as in Ps. 1:6: “But the way of the wicked will perish.” Nevertheless, I hold no prejudice against the interpretation of anyone, although I do not see how they can perish from the right way when they are not yet on the right way. However, those can be frightened by their danger who take delight in their way as if it were the right way but do not know Christ as the true Way.

For His wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are those who take refuge in Him.

In the Hebrew this belongs to the preceding verse, which reads this way in its entirety: “Worship the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way; for His wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who trust in Him.”

This, then, is the meaning: Make haste, and hurry to worship Christ, so that you do not perish because of His anger. And do not deceive yourselves, as though you still had a long time. You should know that His anger will be quickly and speedily kindled, that it will come suddenly, when you least expect it, as in Matt. 24:48–50: “If that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know.” So in Prov. 1:27: “When calamity comes like a whirlwind,” and I Thess. 5:2–3: “For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night. When people say, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them.” Therefore this threat is terrible, because if the wrath of God suddenly clutches them, there will be no one to save them. Finally, this psalm concludes with a most beautiful exclamation. This, he says, is the sum of it all: “Blessed are they who take refuge in Him.” For this He suffered, for this He was resurrected, for this He was established as King, and for this He received everything as His heritage, in order that He might be able to save all who take refuge in Him.

However, only this confidence justifies, without the works of the Law, as the apostle teaches in the Epistle to the Romans (3:28) and in the Epistle to the Galatians (2:16). But this confidence is most difficult when so much adversity offers resistance, and so much prosperity offers temptation. Therefore blessed are they who have not been caused to stumble because divine grace is needed, not human strength. For thus the good Spirit does not threaten eternally; on the contrary, He consoles the terrified without end. He says: If you fear His wrath, do not despair, but trust. “Blessed are those who take refuge in Him.” For this purpose His wrath terrifies, that it may urge you to trust in Him. Amen.

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2Luther, M. (1999, c1958). *Vol. 14: Luther's works, vol. 14 : Selected Psalms III* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Ps,1.1). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.