

Luther's *Anfechtungen*

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Martin Luther's relentless search for forgiveness and peace with God can be fully understood only against the backdrop of his frequent *anfechtungen*. What were his *anfechtungen*?

Anfechtungen is the (German) word that Luther used to describe the overwhelming times of spiritual trial, terror, despair, and religious crisis that he experienced throughout his life. At the heart of such an *anfechtung* was the terrifying feeling that God was going to judge and condemn the sinner at any moment. In the wake of such a feeling came subsequent feelings of deep sadness that God had forsaken one.

Luther was not alone in his experience of *anfechtungen*. The late medieval piety that Luther was a part of, which stressed Christ primarily as the avenging Judge, made spiritual terror, guilt, and despair the ordeal of many. The monks especially spoke of this. If Luther was unique, it was the intensity of his *anfechtungen* that set him apart. Since he saw his sin and failure to keep the Law so clearly, his fear of Christ the Judge grew exponentially.

Luther's *anfechtungen* were no mere intellectual questions or doubts, but religious crises that gripped his entire being. Usually it was thinking about Christ the Judge that brought them on. Often it was the mass (holy communion) that was the stage for this, because for Luther, there in the mass, the avenging, punishing Christ was present in his body and blood to judge. This was his experience at this first mass (Luther's Works 54:234) and also at the Corpus Christi festival in Eisleben in 1515 (LW 54:19-20) when he was gripped with horror over the closeness of Christ. Yet, at times even viewing the crucifix or hearing the name of Jesus would cause Luther to recoil with terror, for it was the Judge that He was seeing or hearing (LW 8:188).

The other main cause of Luther's *anfechtungen* was meditating on eternal election. This particular kind of *anfechtung* was for Luther the worst of all. It brought with it an overwhelming feeling of having been abandoned by God's grace and of being lost forever. The monks called this intense melancholy "the bath of Satan," and it was considered a serious sin for it called into question God's goodness. It was the ultimate *anfechtung*, one that Luther experienced in Wittenberg for the first time. And he experienced it many times after. Luther describes these spiritual trials as so great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them, no pen could describe them, and one who had not himself experienced them could not believe them. And so great were they that, if they had been sustained or had lasted for half an hour, even for one tenth of an hour, he [Luther] would have perished completely and all of his bones would have been reduced to ashes. At such a time, God seems so terribly angry, and with him the whole creation. At such a time, there is no flight, no comfort, within or without, but all things accuse . . . In this moment, it is strange to say, the soul cannot believe that it can ever be redeemed (LW 31:129).

Though some have tried to explain Luther's *anfechtungen* as clinical depression, such explanations are not satisfactory. First, Luther was usually able to work during these times they didn't incapacitate him. Second, as Martin Brecht points out, "this was not a psychic affliction, but the living God confronting him" (Brecht, Martin Luther, His Road to Reformation, p. 80). This was the Law of God accusing and condemning Luther, not some delusional imaginations of Luther himself. For Luther, these afflictions were spiritual not psychological.

Even after his Reformation discovery of justification by faith, Luther's *anfechtungen* periodically reappeared, but now they were seen in a different light. The reformer began to rethink them.

After his evangelical breakthrough, Luther understood the positive contribution that his *anfechtungen* made to his theology (his understanding of the Gospel). In one of his "**Table Talks**" Luther once remarked, "I didn't learn my theology all at once. I had to ponder over it ever more deeply, and my spiritual trials [*anfechtungen*] were of help to me in this, for one doesn't learn anything without practice" (LW 54:50). Later, in discussing what makes a true theologian, Luther, following Psalm 119, lists *tentatio* (spiritual trials, including *anfechtungen*) as one of the three rules, and calls it the "touchstone" of theology. (LW 34:279-288).

It is important to see why Luther considered his spiritual trials as good. His *anfechtungen* were valuable because they drove him to Scripture and compelled him to cling to God's promises. They taught him by experience, how sure, mighty, and comforting, God's promises can be. Thus, he not only knew, but lived God's Word.

Thus it was through the Scriptures that Luther overcame his *anfechtungen*. When the onslaught of darkness began he would turn not just to any word of Scripture, but to the Gospel portions of Scripture, the promises, which spoke of Christ's completed salvation and of God's present help and mercy.

Luther's *anfechtungen* were crucial to him, for they drove him into Scripture; and once inside the Scriptures they continually drove him to Christ.