

CHAPTER FOUR: The True and the False Church **by Rev. Dr. Anthony Steinbronn**

Man Does Not Live By Bread Alone

The cause of Old Testament Israel's rejection as God's people was her refusal to be led and governed by God. Israel wanted to live, not by faith in the promises of God, but by what was actually present. On the other hand, God wanted her to be faithful and to rely on His promises. "Thus they seek what is plainly contrary to the will and government of God, and if at this time they do not get what they seek, they look for another god" (LW 8:200).

The Jews tempted God. When God did not immediately supply them with everything according to their liking and prescription, they quickly ran after strange gods...seeking such gods as Ashtaroth and Baal, to give them help on the spot and forthwith, without faith in a promise, so that they could feel the help and take hold of it with their hands (LW 8:201).

In order to deal with our sinful tendencies, God offers promises to His people; "but at the same time He also tests and exercises them in faith and teaches that they should live more by the Word than by bread" (LW 8:201).

One must be careful to hold fast to the fact that God makes promises and defers the things promised, and that He tries us with a scarcity of available things in order to instruct us in faith in the promise and in order that this faith may be strengthened and may learn to believe God not only in prosperous times, when things are available, but also in adversity, when things are lacking (LW 8:201).

If bread is lacking, a strange god is not to be called upon but, instead, the heart should be strengthened by faith in the Word (LW 8:204). In all things, God wants His threats to be feared and His promises to be believed and waited for. But this is impossible without faith!

Faith must believe and fear things that are invisible, just as Noah fears that punishment of the flood, which he does not see, and hopes for a liberation, which is not in sight. We believe in Christ the Lord, whom we do not see, and we believe that He will come on the Last Day and raise us from the dead and glorify us, as Philippians 3:20-21 says, but that He will inflict punishments on the ungodly, who do not know God and do not obey the Gospel. Thus the GODLY fear the threats and trust the promises. But the ungodly do not fear, do not believe, do not hope, and do not care about God (LW 8:202).

Adam's Why and Abraham's Faith

Simply defined, "original sin is to become a god" (LW 3:139). In his asking why, Adam placed himself in the place of God as Creator when he searched into the reason for God's command and prohibition concerning the tree. "God wanted us to follow His Word and command, not to inquire with inordinate diligence into the reasons for His commands. When Adam and Eve do this, they perish; for they put themselves in the place of God the Creator and forget that they are creatures" (LW 3:139).

Adam was not satisfied with God's command and, instead, sought to learn the reason WHY God ordered him to keep away. No longer was Adam concerned about carrying out God's commandment as one of His creatures but, instead, passed judgment upon God Himself. Therefore, it became ruinous for Adam to think about THE WHY and it caused him great harm (LW 4:144).

In contrast, Abraham obeyed God's command without hesitation. When God commanded him to be circumcised or when God commanded him to offer up Isaac, Abraham OBEYS at once; "he does not debate with himself why God has given this command but goes immediately to the designated place" (LW 3:282). Abraham considered WHO IT WAS WHO WAS SPEAKING and he simply "cuts the throat of this baneful why and tears it out of his heart by the roots" (LW 3:173). He understood that it is God's will that his curiosity be restrained and that it remain within the definite bounds placed upon him by God in His Word.

He takes his reason captive and finds satisfaction in the one fact that He who gives the command is just, good, and wise; therefore He cannot command anything but what is just, good and wise, no matter what the opinion of reason is, and no matter if reason does not understand (LW 3:173).

After Abraham had received the command, he sees nothing else than God's command. He mortifies the head of the serpent (which is reason and man's will) and acts on what God has commanded him to do. As evidence in the faith of Abraham, OUTWARD OBEDIENCE follows upon INWARD OBEDIENCE. Abraham heard and believed the Word; then he became a righteous doer of works by following Christ.

But we refuse even to maintain that Abraham was justified because he forsook everything when he went out from Ur of the Chaldeans. He had already been justified when he believed the promise of God that was revealed through the holy patriarchs. If he had not been righteous, he would have never have obeyed God when He called. Therefore he heard the Word and believed the Word; and later on, after he had been justified thereby, he also became a righteous doer of works by wandering about and following Christ, who had called him (LW 2:269-270).

God's Game: The Cross and His Way of Governing His People

The Life of Jacob

The life of Jacob is pleasing in God's sight because he has the Word, faith, and the Spirit which dwells within him. Hence, God must care for His own who have their eyes fixed on His Word. Even though they are tormented and troubled by devils and men yet God numbers all their actions and thoughts and cares for them in all of their adversities (LW 6:74-75).

Jacob, by his faith, was able to conquer God just as the Canaanite woman was able to cling to Christ when Jesus opposed her (Matthew 15:21-28). After the wrestling had ended, Christ laid aside His mask and spoke life-giving words to Jacob (Genesis 32:22-30). He revealed Himself as the One who rewards those who persistently seek Him and cling to Him in faith (LW 6:139-140). He is the Man who exercises Jacob until his faith shows itself; as evidence of his faith, Jacob's name is changed by God Himself.

Yet the believer's conquering of God is not in such a way that He is subjected to us but that His wrath, and judgment, are conquered by us through "praying, seeking, and knocking" (LW 6:141). He no longer is an angry judge, as He seemed to be, but He becomes a most loving Father, and therefore, your faith has saved you. In this test, and in the changing of Jacob's name, Jesus sought not to destroy Jacob but to confirm and strengthen him in the promise.

Thus, Jacob is a wanderer all of his life yet he is a patriarch and a saint. In his sojourn he suffers much, especially with the incest of Reuben, the defilement of Dinah (Genesis 34), the death of Rachel (Genesis 35), and the enslavement of Joseph (Genesis 37). Yet God allowed these things to happen so that faith might be exercised and that Jacob would learn to **DEPEND ON HIS WORD** and **PROMISES ALONE** despite the visible things perceptible to the senses.

For the things which are discerned by the eyes are deceiving and transient, but the things which are promised and not seen are sure and steadfast. But delay and postponement are to be awaited in faith and borne with equanimity, for the invisible things will appear at the right time (LW 6:305).

Therefore in the darkness of the cross we must cling to the Word of God alone. Yet this knowledge of God does not come without practice and experience. It is only through practice and experience that we understand that these struggles are indications of His great love and goodness and not of His wrath and anger. These things are done by God so that we might learn what is the good, acceptable and perfect will of God and be equipped to comfort others in their trials.

The worst kind of punishment that God can bring upon a people is not to punish them. In contrast the most blessed kind of life is when God does not close His eyes to our faults but immediately seeks to correct us with his rods and crosses (LW 6:327). Therefore we must learn to live with our eyes shut and to trust simply in His promises even though He pretends to be sleeping, exercising no care for us.

The Life of Joseph

Joseph overcomes evil by faith as he takes hold of the Word spoken by his father and clings to it. As a result, he does not allow Satan to rob him of his promise. The Holy Spirit was present with Joseph so that the Word planted in his heart would become an immovable rock against the devil.

For Joseph had the entire Psalter in his heart. In actuality and in effect he does everything taught in the Psalms about faith, patience, and waiting. He waits, and he sustains himself with the divine promises which he heard from his father. He does not despair; nor does he murmur against God (LW 7:56).

Joseph, through his faith, conquered all. **FIRST** the devil assailed him on the left with all sorts of troubles while he was in exile away from his parents and family. Next he sought to assail him on the right with the allurements of the flesh such as lust and pleasure. This is especially the more difficult trial because of Joseph's youth. He felt all of these temptations in the flesh but he was able to overcome these temptations because he had the Word of God in his heart.

Joseph was well taught by his father, his mother Rachel, and his nurse Deborah. Luther especially speaks of Deborah who was like a grandmother to Joseph and who still had a fresh memory of the patriarchs such as Noah, Shem, and Eber. Isaac too was still alive and he also

carefully impressed the Word upon Joseph as he recounted the histories of the patriarchs. Joseph also was an eyewitness to the crosses and joys of his father Jacob. It is with this teaching, and the Lord's presence, that Joseph was kept in the faith while he served in exile.

...that Wisdom, that is, God's Son, did not leave the righteous man when he was sold but went down with him into the pit and prison. Joseph had Him as a Teacher who gave the increase, so that he kept the Word which he had heard firmly fixed in his heart. He had the punishment of the Flood before his eyes, the burning of the Sodomites, and other disasters, then also the various liberations of godly men recounted by his father. From this source the fear of God, faith, hope, and other virtues grew and were strengthened in him, so that his heart could not be made to totter by any commotions (LW 7:125).

Joseph is the model of the perfect man and was the most precious treasure. Yet this treasure was unknown to the world and hidden from it. Though all seems hopeless for Joseph and that he is alone in his trials and afflictions, yet Christ, the Bishop of souls, sees Joseph and cares for him.

The life of Joseph is an excellent illustration of the manner in which God governs His saints. When He works, He turns His face away at first and seems to be the devil, not God. This is to see HIS BACK as Moses records in Exodus 33:20, 23. "You must not see My works and counsels with which I am fashioning and refashioning you according to My good pleasure" (LW 7:104). Joseph beheld His back and WAITED until God should reveal and show forth His salvation.

Thus the Christian life is one of LEARNING FAITH and HOPE in the Lord. In trials we learn patience, faith and hope because our life is hidden with God. If Joseph did not have His Word with him; "if the Holy Spirit and God's Son had not gone down with him into the pit and had not sustained him with the Word which he had learned, he would not have been able to bear the assaults of Satan" (LW 7:128). Joseph learned that a man does not live by bread alone but by every Word that proceeds from the Lord's mouth.

Therefore it is not due to human help and consolation that he conquers and endures against Satan, the world, and the flesh. Nor does he live in any other life than that which is in the Word of God. For he simply clings to the promises and is prepared to endure even greater evils. Although according to the flesh and also according to the spirit he desires to be freed, nevertheless, because he sees that it is God's will, he rests content with God's good pleasure and mortifies the flesh when it cries out and murmurs saying: "The Lord's will be done!" (LW 7:128).

The purpose of the cross is so that God can crucify, mortify, and reduce the old man to nothing. In the cross, He seeks to form you according to His plan. Because Joseph waited on the Lord, he became a savior of the world. God uses all of Egypt to restore Joseph and deliver him from his imprisonment. Pharaoh and the entire nation are moved by God to serve His purpose and to deliver Joseph from his cross (LW 7:136).

The life of Joseph shows to us that FAITH MUST PRECEDE and then the WAITING MUST FOLLOW. We must learn that God hides Himself under the form of the worst devil so that, to those who wait, He will come and save them. Thus, the life of a Christian should teach

him “that the goodness, mercy and power of God cannot be grasped by speculation but must be understood on the basis of experience” (LW 7:175) and confident reliance on the Word of God.

Just endure and wait for the Lord; be content with His Word and cling to His promises. This is how God exercises, exalts and plays with His saints. It is out of His great love for us that He works in our lives in this manner. Due to original sin, the rod of discipline is necessary. It is paternal love that demands blows and stripes be administered in order that children may be improved.

Therefore in Baptism we receive not only the forgiveness of sins BUT also the purging away of sin. Forgiveness is free due to the merits of Christ yet this forgiveness is followed by distress, tribulation and mortification. Like a physician, God proceeds with purging, burning and cutting, even though this is not done without pain. God accomplishes all this in us for OUR OWN GOOD lest we snore through life and perish in our sins. Thus, the cross and trials become the medicines with which God purges away sin.

For this is the difference between the children of God and unbelievers. The latter offer resistance and refuse to endure the discipline of the Lord. But for the godly this discipline is necessary because of the flesh, which is corrupt and is full of sins, smugness, contempt of God, wrath and lusts. It is because of these that they do not pray, do not believe, do not hope, do not love, and do not trouble themselves about God (LW 8:9-10).

In these trials, it is His desire that we fix our eyes only upon His Word and sacraments and remember that the cross is given so that we might be humbled and learn to wait for His gracious appearing. This wonderful government of God presents us with a paradox, that is, He keeps His promises but “in such a way that everything seems contradictory and far different from the Word” (LW 8:79). We are His people, loved by Him, and yet daily He confronts us with the cross and trials so that I am doubtful, perplexed and filled with despair. Nevertheless, He has mercy on us and we have His sure promises.