

Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands

This Easter hymn, while drawing upon medieval antecedents, is Luther's own composition. It is dated early on in Luther's hymn-writing career to 1524. Study of it leads us into Luther's innovative understanding of the atonement as a mighty "duel" between life and death. But we grasp Luther's "duel" only when we take both Good Friday and Easter Sunday realistically, as a battle fought in and over the body of Jesus.

Notes on the Text: LBW # 134; ELW # 370; WA 35:443-5. As noted in the study to follow, already the LBW mangled the narrative logic of Luther's hymn by omitting his original verses 2 and 3. ELW does not improve matters by including Luther's original verse 3 but now omitting Luther's original verse 4.

We have to reconstruct the hymn text. Unfortunately, the LBW version omitted the original verses two and three and this omission guts the hymn's narrative structure, blocking deeper understanding of what for Luther is the Easter victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death. We can see how important the omitted verses are by noting that verse one lays out a contradiction. On the one hand, Christ Jesus lays lifeless, imprisoned by the power of Death. On the other hand, Christ Jesus is ascended and victorious at God's right hand. How is this contradiction to be mediated or resolved? Certainly not by omitting Luther's verses two and three!

To see what is at stake, let us consider what the result is of dropping Luther's explication of the contradiction between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The omission turns the resurrection into a sheer act of force, as if asserting one pole of the contradiction, Easter, as true against the other, Good Friday, as false. This solution (of the editors of Luther's hymn, not Luther!) to the contradiction amounts to a form of Christological docetism (i.e. the teaching that Christ only appeared to be human), that is, as if Jesus only appeared to have truly died, that in reality Jesus is the Risen One, no longer, if ever, and certainly not forever and ever Him who was born of Mary and crucified under Pontius Pilate. Corresponding to this is a docetist view of salvation: God simply asserts the truth of our forgiveness against the falsehood of our guilt and death. Faith then becomes a gnosis, a kind of Christian Science, of our supposed innocence and immortality to be asserted and maintained by sheer will-power in face of the contradictory evidence of our on-going battle with sin, death and the power of the devil.

But in reality, according to Luther, when Jesus forgives sin in God's name He does not wave a magic wand and disappear it into thin air, nor does God the Father wave a wand on Easter Sunday and say, Whoof! You never really were dead! Forgiveness is a moral act in which the Son takes the sin that He forgives upon Himself so that, on Good Friday, the Father dramatically holds Him responsible for this bold act of love for the loveless and unlovely. As Friedrich Gogarten rightly insisted, Jesus takes responsibility for us, at our worst, as perishing sinners. Thus the missing verses two and three explain the sense Luther makes of the contradiction between Good Friday and Easter Sunday as not merely a verbal or rhetorical figure, but as an actual contradiction between the old judgment of death upon sin and the new judgment of life upon sinners who are found in Christ. The contradiction is resolved in Christ, that is, *propter Christum*, because of Christ's surpassing act of love on Calvary that over-fulfills, so to say, the Law's just demand and in this way explodes its juridical force to condemn eternally. MacDonald's 19th century translation of verses two and three read as follows:

2 No man yet Death overcame—
All sons of men were helpless;
Sin for this was all to blame,
For no one yet was guiltless.
So Death came that early hour,
O'er us he took up his power,
And held us all in his kingdom. Alleluia!

3 Jesus Christ, God's only Son,
Into our place descending,
Away with [all] our sins hath done,
And therewith from Death rending
Right and might, made him a jape,
Left him nothing but Death's shape:
His ancient sting—he has lost it. Alleluia!

With the addition of these verses, we see that for Luther Christ's victory is not only or even chiefly a matter of power, God asserting His reign against the evil usurper, Death. More importantly, Christ's victory for Luther is a matter of "*right* and might." Christ *rightfully* has won back dominion over sinners who *rightfully* had been held responsible for their sin, "for no one yet was guiltless."

The idea is the Pauline one, "that the wages of sin are death" such that "one man's obedience leads to righteousness for many." By descending "into our place," and freely, innocently and out of love taking on Himself the sin of the world, this true Pascal Lamb of God (as we see in verse three) removes the guilty obligation of sinners to the dominion of Death and thus invalidates the otherwise rightful claim of Death to condemn sinners. He does this *rightfully*—in obedience to God and out of love for sinners— by taking their sin away from them and placing it upon Himself. In this way he draws condemnation of death rightfully to Himself. Christ does this deed of exchanging Himself, the righteous for the guilty, in fulfillment of the true demand of the law to love God above all and to love one's neighbor as oneself. That is why this awesome exchange and mighty duel issues in Christ's victory, not only an expression of divine power to give life to the dead but all the more of divine *righteousness* to give us what we do not deserve on account of Christ's awesome service to us, giving His life a ransom for many. In the Easter victory, as Eberhard Jüngel has urged, the dramatic confrontation between the Father and the Son on Good Friday is resolved when in the Spirit the Father recognizes as His very own this love and justice of the crucified, dead and buried Jesus. This "recognition" is what resurrection, theologically interpreted, means: not just a physical miracle reversing death but a theological miracle of God surpassing God!

With the missing background to the hymn thus supplied, we can see once again Luther's narrative theological approach and its existential application. Luther first tells the Easter story of Christ's "strange and dreadful strife" in the (original) verses one to three. Midway through verse three, Luther transits to the meaning of this narrative "for us" by recalling the Exodus story of the Passover: "See, now his blood marks our door; Faith points to it; death passes over and Satan cannot harm us." The final three verses continue in this application of the Easter message to "rejoice" in Christ since "faith lives upon no other."

It would be no small exaggeration to say that today Christian teaching on the atonement—so crucial to any view of Christianity as a message of God’s salvation, so indispensable to keeping faith from degenerating into moralism, legalism, pietism, pompous religiosity and/or frenetic do-goodism—is in disarray. Very few know how to distinguish Luther’s view of the “mighty duel” and the “joyful exchange” from the legalistic scheme that Gerhard Forde rightly (but inadequately) criticized in the so-called “satisfaction theory” going back to Anselm and which predominated in both Lutheran Orthodoxy and Lutheran Pietism. Not to put too fine a point on it, the latter view said in effect: “You can’t help but sin, but Jesus took the rap.” Here Jesus is merely an external punishment-bearer, a scapegoat, and the “good news” is rather a “good deal:” you can escape—not your sin!—but its consequences in punishment on the condition that you believe the right things about Jesus (so Orthodoxy) or feel the right things about Jesus (so Pietism). Against this legalism and pietism, Forde was right to say that atonement is actual in the preaching of forgiveness as God’s very own action.

But for Luther this action of divine forgiveness is the victory Christ won, once and for all, and thus still presents in the preaching of the gospel. Jesus faced in our place that dreadful moment of abandonment by God, expressed in the cry of dereliction from the cross. It is consequently also true that because Jesus faced the just wrath of God upon the sin that ruins creation, we who are baptized into Christ’s death for us already have that dreadful moment behind us. We must merely die temporally in order to be raised from death to eternal life. For Jesus has already emptied hell and treads upon its shuttered doors. Therefore nothing in all creation can separate us from the victorious love of God in Christ Jesus, the crucified and risen and returning Lord.

As we have seen, the deeper truth for Luther is not that Jesus is a mere punishment-bearer but that—out of unfathomable love!—He is a sin-bearer, as we sing in the *Agnus Dei*, adoring the condescending Lord who meets us anew and anew in the sacramental bread and wine. Rightfully then, and justly, Jesus can bring us God’s self-surpassing righteousness to declare and to make us just. Indeed, this righteousness is just who Christ is, as the one Man who truly lived for others, even sinful others, before God. As the one who has claimed our sin as His own and “condemned it in the flesh,” yet now vindicated and victorious because He did so out of perfect love that fulfills the Law’s just demand, Jesus can and does remake us one and all according to His own transformative righteousness. “For our sake he made him who knew no sin to be sin in order that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (II Cor. 5: 21).

Four-Week Teaching Plan

Week One: Study I Cor. 15: 3-20 and explore the reasons why Paul insists upon the reality of the resurrection of Christ corresponding to the reality of his sufferings and death. See what existential difference this makes to Paul’s life now as an apostle in I Cor. 15: 30-33. At the same time probe what is meant by “reality” by examining I Cor. 15:35-57.

Week Two: Study the anti-docetic motifs in the gospels’ resurrection narratives, especially in Luke (24:30, 35, 36-43) and John (20: 6-8, 24-29). You can see what ideas were being opposed in these motifs by studying the following representative text from early Christian docetism. “But a certain Cerinthus,

himself being disciplined in the teaching of the Egyptians, asserted that the world was not made by the primal Deity, but by some virtue which was an offshoot from that Power which is above all things, and which (yet) is ignorant of the God that is above all. And he supposed that Jesus was not generated from a virgin, but that he was born son of Joseph and Mary, just in a manner similar with the rest of men, and that (Jesus) was more just and more wise (than all the human race). And (Cerinthus alleges) that, after the baptism (of our Lord), Christ in form of a dove came down upon him, from that absolute sovereignty which is above all things. And then, (according to this heretic,) Jesus proceeded to preach the unknown Father, and in attestation (of his mission) to work miracles. It was, however, (the opinion of Cerinthus,) that ultimately Christ departed from Jesus, and that Jesus suffered and rose again; whereas that Christ, being spiritual, remained beyond the possibility of suffering.” -- Hippolytus, *Refutation of Heresies*, Book 7; CHAP. XXI.--THE SYSTEM OF CERINTHUS CONCERNING CHRIST.

Week Three: On the basis of the foregoing studies, supply the missing verses two and three of *Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands* to show what difference it makes to treat the contradiction between Good Friday and Easter as only apparent (so the docetists) or as real (so Luther).

Week Four: Employ the following citations from Marc Lienhard's important study to explore Luther's theology of Christ's atoning victory: "... Luther placed his main emphasis on the wrath of God which must be appeased.... 'Therefore God has given us in the first place a man who satisfied the divine righteousness for us all...' Forgiveness and new life are given to us, without any merit on our part, but they cost Christ dearly... Luther returns again and again to this matter of the price of this grace, which is Christ himself and his work.... How is the saving work of Christ accomplished? By the fact that 'he has represented us in the fear of death, taken all our sins upon himself and has exterminated (*ausgeleschet*) them' (180). "On the one hand, he does this by fulfilling perfectly the requirements of the law. In my place, he thus 'satisfies' the law entirely ... by respect for the First Commandment. Christ loved God with all his heart; he remained obedient to him, even unto death... without being obliged to... [Anselm's concept of satisfaction] is inadequate to express the work of Christ... [because it] risks appearing as a kind of restoration of a balance which has been upset in the moral order... But it is not at all necessary to oppose the ideas of Luther radically to those of Anselm, as some Scandinavian theologians have done" (181). "... Luther emphasizes more than Anselm that Christ does not work, as one might say, from outside upon God, as though he were the qualified representative of humanity seeking to reestablish an order destroyed by sin. We are dealing instead with a struggle within God himself, a combat between the Father and the Son become human, the Son offering himself to the wrath of the Father in order to let love triumph and open the way of forgiveness.... Sin is not the only hostile power to be conquered. Luther adds the devil and death, and, differing hereby from the early church, also the law... Thus death has become [Christ's debtor], has done him wrong, and has sinned against him, has deprived itself of all things, so that Christ has a just case against it" (182).

Sermon Suggestions

There are multiple opportunities during the Easter season to preach on the anti-docetist themes that emerge from study of Luther's *Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands*. One might focus on the following. 1) There is no Christian faith that is not faith in the risen and victorious Jesus Christ; 2) We

preachers are misrepresenting God if Christ by His resurrection has not defeated sin, death and the power of the devil; 3) We believers are self-deceived and still dead in our sins if Christ is not raised from the dead; 4) Christ's victory was to over-fulfill the law of love by loving sinners and taking their burden upon Himself to give them as a free gift His own relationship to God as Father by the gift of the Spirit and faith; 5) Christ's victory takes form in us as we gather for the Eucharist to proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again; 6) This holy meal does not turn into us as we consume it, but rather we are turned into it, the very Body of Christ in the world; 7) as the Body of Christ, we have an anti-docetic mission of healing in the world, body and soul.

Select Bibliography for Further Study

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