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## Lectures on Psalm 51 1513-1515

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# Lectures on Psalm 51

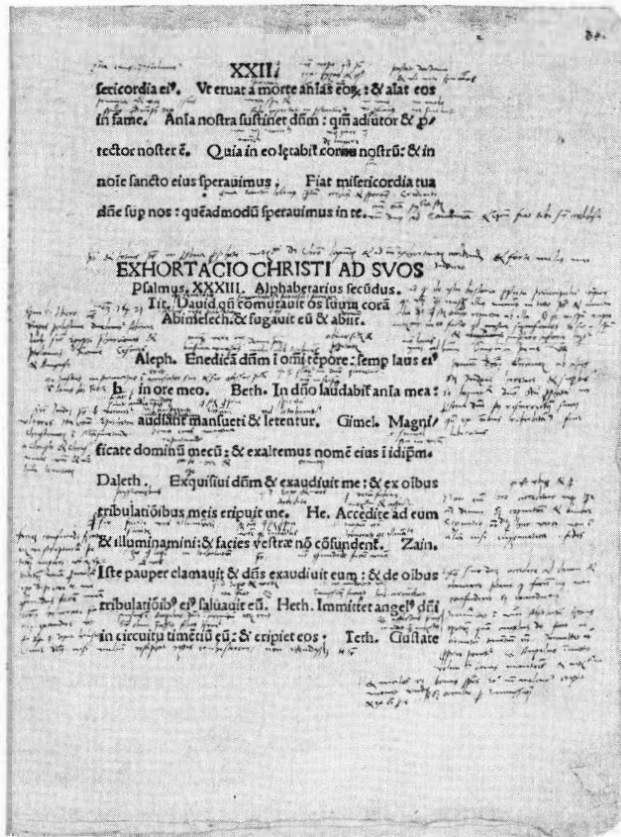
1513–1515

MICKY L. MATTOX

## INTRODUCTION

The earliest of Martin Luther's academic lectures for which we have a reliable record are those given on the Psalms between 1513 and 1515. The *Dictata super psalterium* were read out to the students and presumably taken down by them verbatim, as was the practice at that time. Indeed, there is much in these lectures to mark them as typically medieval. Most importantly, they were offered for students in a monastic community where the Psalms were prayed corporately several times each day.

Each of the Psalms was deeply familiar to Luther and his students, and their meaning was a matter of constant reflection. Luther's exposition of the Psalms was also offered in a traditional form: he first provided brief notes on the text itself, the so-called glosses; then, in order to bring out the Bible's deeper meanings, he offered "scholia," extended comments that probed the text spiritually and addressed important theological questions. This traditional form of biblical commentary was reflected in the outward appearance of medieval Bibles, where one would see at the center of the page a few lines of Scripture, with generous space between each line and large margins at the sides. The interlinear spaces were filled with glosses that helped clarify meaning, while the generous side margins provided com-



A page from Luther's copy of *Dictata super psalterium* showing glosses and notes

ments on the text drawn from respected Christian biblical expositors.

Luther's lectures on the Psalms followed the tradition of the "glossed Bible," but just here he also took an innovative step forward. Utilizing the latest technology, he had a Wittenberg printer prepare pages of the biblical text that left the spaces between the lines and at the margins blank, so his students could take down his comments and use them to surround and thus illuminate the biblical text at hand. This new procedure reflected what would become an abiding principle in Luther's theology: that those who would know God should probe and taste the Holy Scripture for themselves.

During his long career as Doctor of Bible in Wittenberg, Luther probed and tasted the Psalms many times. These first lectures, however, have been the object of special interest to scholars because they come from the period several years before before his *95 Theses*<sup>a</sup> thrust him onto the center stage of European history. Here we meet Martin Luther as the pious monk and newly minted Doctor of Theology, lecturing to his monastic brothers in service to their shared pursuit of wisdom and holiness. A central marker of this context is Luther's profound emphasis on humility, which was considered a crucial virtue in all the Western monastic orders. Luther's own group, moreover, the Hermit Order of St. Augustine, had developed a piety that was deeply shaped by their namesake, whose theology emphasized that salvation is a gift of God's grace and therefore not, or at least not in the first place, a divine response to human efforts.<sup>b</sup> Luther's early Psalms lectures reflect just this conviction, especially in his insistence that for every Christian at every stage of the Christian journey the first word of praise to God must be a humbling word

<sup>a</sup> See TAL 1:13–46.

<sup>b</sup> See Eric L. Saak, *High Way to Heaven: The Augustinian Platform Between Reform and Reformation, 1292–1524* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), esp. 671.

of confession, a recognition that one is a sinner before God who can only receive God's favor and salvation as a gift.

Psalm 51, on which Luther is commenting below, was an ideal workshop, so to speak, for bringing this distinctive later medieval Augustinian faith and piety to expression. Included among the traditional seven penitential psalms, this psalm of lament takes as its point of departure King David's adultery with Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11), and the death and destruction that followed. While Luther surely knew that the psalm is about David and his life, like Christians of all times he also read it as the story of his own life, indeed, of every life. Lecturing his way through this psalm in the open space of the classroom and filling in the open page of his biblical text, Luther was developing his own powerfully distinctive take on such traditional themes as sin and grace, confession and forgiveness, faith and humility. The Christian as she appears here is one who is starkly aware that she stands, as Luther puts it, "before God" (*coram Deo*). In the bright light of God's majesty and holiness, and viewed through the lens of God's own words about human beings, she knows and confesses herself a sinner, and in just this way she "justifies God" in his judgment over her. The sinner in effect echoes God's word of judgment, and as she surrenders to it she finds herself justified before God—set right, that is—and on the path toward salvation.



David looks down from his palace as Bathsheba bathes in a pool. From a 1525 edition of Luther's commentary on the seven penitential psalms, *Die Siben Buosz Psalmen*.

1. The Psalms, in Luther's day, had been long and rightly recognized as the prayer book of the church, appearing ubiquitously throughout Christian liturgy and worship. They were especially prominent in the daily religious life of monastic communities such as Luther's order, the Hermits of St. Augustine.

Perhaps the best introduction to the Christian use of the Psalms for the life of prayer and devotion is to be found in a letter of St. Athanasius (c. 296-373). See his *On the Incarnation*, rev. ed., trans. by a Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1953), Appendix: "Letter to Marcellinus," 97-119.

2. Luther's interpretation of the Psalms leans heavily on the Greek writings of the apostle Paul, especially the Epistle to the Romans. In his later lectures on Romans (1515-1516) a similar pattern emerges, this time with the Psalms being brought to the aid of understanding Paul. The back and forth between the psalmist and the apostle seen here is a compelling instance of the principle that Holy Scripture is its own interpreter.

3. In Rom. 3:4, Paul first quotes Ps. 116:11, which says that "every human being is a liar," and follows that with a quote from Ps. 51:4.

4. The passive voice Latin verb *iustificatur* here could be rendered either "justified" or "made just." The latter translation makes clear Luther's intent: God is not somehow being "made just" within God's own being; rather, God is being made just in those who are, as mentioned above, being justified by God and joined to God. The words of God are the means by which this justification is accomplished.

## LECTURES ON PSALM 51<sup>c</sup>

**T**HIS PSALM is very widely known; even so, it is certainly very difficult, especially in verse five, on which almost as many interpretations have been offered as there were interpreters.<sup>1</sup> For that reason we wish for now to follow the apostle,<sup>2</sup> who in Rom. 3[:4] uses this passage to prove that every human being is a liar and a sinner, while God alone is true and righteous. This must be understood as referring to those people who have not yet been justified by God and joined to God, since such persons are righteous and true. Therefore he says [Rom. 3:4]: "But God is true, and every human being is a liar,<sup>3</sup> as it is written, 'That you may be justified in your words, and that you may overcome when you are judged.'" And according to some, in what follows he introduces a corollary [Rom. 3:5]: "But if our iniquity serves to commend the righteousness of God, etc." This seems to follow from the words, *Against you I have sinned, that you may be justified* (v. 4), as if he could not be justified unless we sin. But this should be understood in another way by setting forth some theses:

First. All human beings are in sins before God and commit sin; that is, they truly are sinners.

Second. To this God himself bore witness through the prophets and in the end he established the same by the suffering of Christ, for it is on account of the sins of humankind that he made him suffer and die.

Third. God is not made just in himself, but in his words and in us.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>c</sup> This translation is an updated version of the text in LW 10:235-43.



In this 1522 printing of Luther's German New Testament, an initial letter D features the apostle Paul holding a book and a sword. Woodcut designed by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553).

Fourth. We become sinners then when we admit that we are such, for such we are before God.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, it follows: One who is not sinner (that is, one who does not admit herself a sinner) openly attempts to condemn God in his own words, by which he bears witness that we are in sins. And such persons insist that Christ did not die for sins.<sup>6</sup> And so they pass judgment on God and try to make him a liar. But they will neither win nor gain the upper hand; God, however, has prevailed. Of such kind were and are the Jews, down to the present day.<sup>7</sup>

Whence there are many fine statements in the gospel and the apostle's writings which appear to lead us to sin, although they seek nothing else but that we should confess and acknowledge that we are sinners.<sup>8</sup> The psalmist says *Against you alone have I sinned* (v. 4), and so God is made righteous and truthful in his words, by which he declares us to be sinners. And he emerges

5. As justification does not make God in God's self just, so here one is not made a sinner by the confession of sin. Instead, one who confesses sin thereby becomes to herself what in reality she already was, as mentioned in the first thesis.

6. Luther's assertion here that the Christian is one who confesses himself a sinner anticipates the advice he offered in a letter to George Spengler in 1516: "Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners." See *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 109–11.

7. Scholars have struggled, particularly since the Shoah, to make sense of Luther's harsh criticisms of Jews and Judaism. Some see the Jews as a constitutive element in Luther's theology because they epitomize for him the reverse side of faith and acceptance by God, that is, unbelief and rejection by God. See Thomas Kaufmann, *Luthers Juden* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014). For a concise introduction to the problem, see Kaufmann's "Luther and the Jews," in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, ed. Dean Philip Bell and Stephen G. Burnett (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 69–104.

8. Luther seems to mean that the Scripture's frequent exhortations to good deeds could lead to sin if they are understood as the means by which we make ourselves just before God.

9. Here, the truth that God loves is the penitent's confession of sin.

10. The recognition that the Christian's relationship with God begins with a daily surrender, and that in this sense God must always have the victory over us, suggests here both Luther's deep monastic piety and his indebtedness to mystical theology.

11. Not confessing sin means saying that God's judgment of the sinner is unjust; self-justification, in turn, means self-glorification.

12. In the two sentences placed within quotation marks here, Luther briefly glosses the meaning of Ps. 51:6 before commenting further. All human beings are sinners, and all have sinned.

victorious because he has been falsely judged. And the one who says, "Against you alone have I sinned," excludes the justifications of the law, as if to say: "I am not talking about sins against the ceremonies of the law, for such sins are figurative and removable by the law. Rather, I am talking about those sins which the law can in no way remove, by no sacrifices, no washings or ceremonies. Therefore against you alone have I sinned, because I am making confession about real sins, not shadowy ones."

For *behold, you have loved the truth* (v. 6).<sup>9</sup> And thus the preceding verse expresses what kind of sin it is he is acknowledging, for it is not a figurative one nor one that can be removed by the blood of goats. And to confess sins in such a way means to justify God and make him the victor.<sup>10</sup> The Jews, who want their sins removed by the blood of goats and who think that their sins are merely figurative, reject this even up till now. Wherefore these things conflict with one another:

Denying that one has sin, or not confessing it—and justifying God.

Justifying oneself before God—and glorifying God.<sup>11</sup>

This is why God is not justified by anyone except the one who accuses and condemns and judges herself. For the righteous person is, first of all, one who accuses and condemns and judges herself. Therefore she justifies God and causes him to win out and to prevail. On the contrary, the ungodly and proud person is, first of all, the excuser and defender, the justifier and savior, of himself. For that very reason he automatically says that he does not need God as his Savior, and he judges God in his words and robs him of his justice and accuses him of being a liar and false. But he will not prevail, for God will win out.

But in case someone does not yet understand that no one is righteous before God, who alone is justified, an even clearer expression follows: *Behold, I was conceived in iniquity* (v. 6). "Therefore it is true that before you I am a sinner and have sinned, so that you alone may be glorious in righteousness and you alone may be justified, when all of us are sinners."<sup>12</sup> It is true, for indeed we are unrighteous and unworthy before God, so that whatever we can do is nothing before him. Yes, even faith and grace, through which we are today justified, would not of themselves justify us if God's covenant had not been established. It is precisely for this reason that we are saved: he made a testament and covenant with us that "whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved." But in



this covenant God is truthful and faithful and keeps what he promised.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore it is true that before him we are always in sins, so that in his covenant and testament which he has established with us he himself might be the one who justifies. Hence, the Hebrew literally says: "Against you alone have I sinned, so that you shall be justified in your word,"<sup>d</sup> that is, in thy covenant. Consequently, God in his covenant does not justify whoever does not sin or does not confess sin, for [as Scripture says] "whoever does not believe, etc. [will be condemned]," in view of which God cannot do it.<sup>14</sup>

However, he says *against you alone* because of legal sins which could also be cleansed by the law, such as touching a dead body, bodily uncleanness, etc. For such sins are sins before the law, and in them it is a matter of sin against Moses rather than against God. He says *I have sinned* (v. 4), namely, in a true and spiritual sin,<sup>15</sup> about which Ps. 19[:12] says: "Cleanse me from my secret sins." And this is the judgment which is the "choice of the king's honor and which the LORD loves,"<sup>e</sup> namely, to accuse and judge oneself. And then the Lord is justified in his words, as Ps. 145[:13] says below: "The LORD is righteous in his words," namely, those in which he shows that all are in sins.

Then follows *that you may be justified* (v. 6). This takes place in those who do not justify themselves but judge that God is righteous and that they, too, are justified by him. Note, however, that he says *that you may be justified*, and not, "that you may be made true," for he is speaking especially against the Jews, as is clear from Rom. 3[:1ff.], who are not ignorant, or at least should not be ignorant, of the fact that all are in sins. But because they believe that they are justified by their own righteousnesses,<sup>16</sup> they make God unrighteous, as though he were doing them an injustice by denying that they can be justified in themselves. Among the Gentiles, however, he is truthful and righteous.<sup>17</sup>

*That you may overcome* (v. 6). This happens among the wicked and unbelieving by whom God is judged, although they ought

13. Here again Luther draws on the New Testament to shed light on the psalm, in this case appealing to the Gospel of Mark (16:16). But he does so in a way that reflects his training in a later medieval form of theology that emphasized God's covenant as defining the terms of the divine-human relationship. According to this way of thinking, God is eternally free and is under no obligation to save fallen humankind. God has freely chosen, however, to establish a covenant or agreement with fallen humankind, and according to this covenant all people who have faith (believe) and receive grace (baptism) will be saved.

14. The Scripture text Luther alludes to here completes the quotation from Mark 16:16 begun above. God here cannot save the person who will not acknowledge and confess sin because God must remain faithful to the terms of the divine covenant of salvation, announced in God's own words.

15. Luther is distinguishing between "legal sins" that violate only the ritual laws of the Old Testament and "true" or "spiritual" sins against God, such as pride or self-righteousness.

16. The Latin plural here, "their own righteousnesses," suggests that in Luther's understanding the Jews think they are justified by keeping the particular commandments of the Old Testament and in this sense make God unrighteous, a liar.

17. By "Gentiles" here Luther means Christians, who confess themselves sinners before God and so justify God in his judgment over them.

<sup>d</sup> See LW 10:237 n.1: "Luther cites the Latin translation of J. Reuchlin's *Septem Psalmi poenitentiales Hebraici*. The source usually quoted by Luther under the designation 'Hebr.,' Jerome's *Psalterium iuxta Hebraeos*, here agrees with the Vulgate."

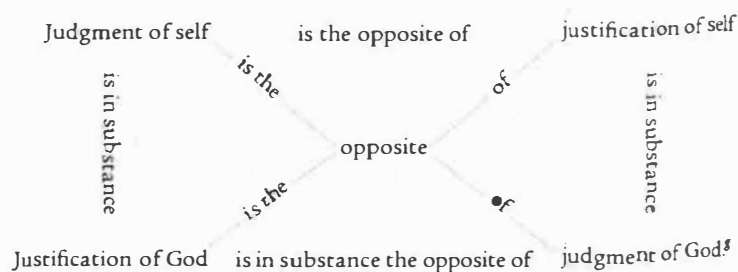
<sup>e</sup> See Ps. 99:4.



rather to be judging themselves, as do those who say: "Against you have I sinned." But instead they say, "I have not sinned." And so one necessarily condemns God as long as one justifies oneself. Concerning such people Prov. 30[:20] says: "This is the kind that wiping her mouth says, 'I have done no wrong.'"<sup>f</sup> For these two things are in a reciprocal relationship:

Whoever	{	justifies herself condemns God, who throughout Scripture states that she is a sinner, especially Ps. 14[:3], as the apostle cites it in Rom. 3[:10].
		judges herself and confesses her sin justifies God and affirms his truthfulness, because she is saying about herself what God is saying about her.

And so she is now in agreement with God and truthful and righteous, like God, with whom she agrees. For they are saying the same thing. But God says what is true and righteous, and she says the same. Therefore she, too, is righteous and truthful together with God. The others, however, fight with God about the truth, for God asserts that they are ungodly, but they deny it. Thus, either God or they are necessarily lying, for they mutually condemn and judge each other. But God cannot possibly lie. Therefore *that you may overcome when you are judged*, namely, *in your words* (v. 6), for he is not justified or judged in himself. And on the basis of this word the difference between judgment and justification becomes abundantly clear.



<sup>f</sup> Luther seems to have quoted this text from memory because the Vulgate has not "the kind that" (*generatio que*) but "the way of an adulterous woman" (*via mulieris adulteriae*).

<sup>g</sup> This chart appears in Latin in WA 55:272.

Now apply the rules of logic concerning the natures of opposite propositions to these.

1. Every self-accuser justifies God: but, on the contrary, not every justifier of God judges herself, because an ungodly person can glorify God, as demons do.<sup>18</sup>

2. Every self-justifier condemns God: but, on the contrary, not every condemner justifies himself, because the damned judge God and yet do not justify themselves.

3. No self-justifier justifies God: but, on the contrary, whoever is a justifier of God rightly justifies himself.

All of this is what was said in the preceding psalm [50:23], "The sacrifice of praise will glorify Me, and that is the path."<sup>19</sup> Thus, Job [15:15] says: "The heavens are unclean in his sight" and [Job 25:5] "the stars are unclean before him, and the moon does not shine," that is, the saints are not saints before him. So Isa. 40[:17] says: "All the nations are as nothing and are regarded as emptiness by him." For the saints confess above all that they are unclean, always saying: "Against you only have I sinned, that you may be justified." Hence, one bright star among them said [1 Tim. 1:15]: "Jesus Christ came to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." Behold, how that star is not clean before God, though it shines with such brilliance before men.<sup>20</sup>

And thence arises the fact that [Ps. 68:35] "God is wonderful in his saints." For it is true: Whoever is most beautiful in the sight of God is the most ugly [in her own sight], and, vice versa, whoever is the ugliest is the most beautiful. In this sense: Whoever is most beautiful in his own eyes is the most shameful before God. How so? Because [Ps. 50:23] "the sacrifice of confession will honor Me."<sup>21</sup> Nor is there any adornment or garment of the church that is more excellent than the clothing of confession, for this suits her above all. Thus, the psalm says [Ps. 96:6], "Praise [confessio] and beauty are before him"; and again [Ps. 104:1]: "You have put on praise [confessio] and beauty"; and [Ps. 111:3] "His work is praise and magnificence." For that reason Ps. 45[:10-11] says, "Hear, O daughter, and see and incline your ear. Be humble, and so the king will desire your beauty."

Therefore, the one who is most attractive in the sight of God is not the one who seems most humble to herself, but the one who sees herself as most filthy and depraved. The reason is that she would never see her own filthiness, unless she had been enlightened in her inmost being with a holy light. But when she

**18.** Perhaps Luther has in mind here the demons' spontaneous recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, as found at times in the gospels (see, e.g., Luke 4:41). This would correlate with his mention of Philippians 2, below, where it would seem the demons bow the knee and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

**19.** One is on the right path who offers up the sacrifice of praise indicated by the psalmist, and this praise necessarily includes, as Luther explains below, one's confession of sin. In Luther's understanding, the Christian who prays the Psalms in this way follows the authentic path shown by the Hebrew prophets.

**20.** Luther here takes the "heavens" and the "stars" as allegorical references to the saints, who are always unworthy before God. The words of "that star," St. Paul, quoted here were often cited to show that increasing holiness brings with it an increasing awareness of one's own unworthiness before God. Hence, the greatest saints always see themselves as the greatest sinners. Luther's comments here and in the next paragraph reprise this traditional theme.

**21.** The psalm has here "sacrifice of praise" (*sacrificium laudis*), which Luther interprets as a "sacrifice of confession" (*sacrificium confessionis*). To praise God, therefore, is to offer God the sacrifice of one's recognition of sin.

22. The illumination to which Luther refers here is divine, that is, it is God's work. The light that illumines the saints internally is the Holy Spirit, and this light reveals one's sin.

23. The Christian here is one who finds herself clothed with spiritual goods as gifts received from God. She may rejoice in these gifts, but the sin of pride always threatens to well up within her. To guard against this temptation she adopts a posture of holy fear, ever confessing her sin and unworthiness before God even as she cautiously rejoices at God's work in her.

24. Here again God is bound in Luther's understanding by what God has announced in his dealings with fallen humankind. What God can or cannot do is not therefore a matter of divine power or freedom, but of God's faithfulness to the terms of his own covenant of salvation. In the language of later medieval theology, the "ordered power of God" (*potentia dei ordinata*), expressed definitively in the divine words of the covenant, restrains the "absolute power of God" (*potentia dei absoluta*), according to which God can, of course, do whatever God wishes. God is bound, then, only by God's own words.

25. Christian approaches to interpreting the Psalms in the Middle Ages sometimes included an effort to identify the true speaker of the Psalms. In this case, one would ask who speaks the words, "Have mercy on me, O God. . . . Against you, you alone, have I sinned." Luther universalizes the psalm here, rendering David's words of repentance the very words that can, indeed must, be spoken by every Christian. All sinners, therefore, are

has such a light, she is attractive, and the brighter the light, the more attractive she is. And the more brightly she has the light, the more she sees herself as ugly and unworthy.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore it is true: The one who is most depraved in his own eyes is the most handsome before God and, on the contrary, the one who sees himself as handsome is thoroughly ugly before God, because he lacks the light with which to see himself. Thus, the blessed Virgin says [Luke 1:48]: "For he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaid." These things are the marrow of Scripture and the meat of the heavenly grain, more desirable than all the glory of riches [Ps. 119:72]: "The law of thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver." If given the option, I would not substitute the riches of the whole world for such knowledge [Ps. 19:10]: "These words of God are sweeter than honey and the honeycomb."

Consequently, even the saints do not boast about their own strengths, although they might delight and rejoice in them by referring them to him who gave them. Either one is extremely absurd: both to be proud in poverty and to be proud in someone else's clothes. Those who justify themselves, since they are ungodly, do the first. Those who are righteous, but are proud of their own strengths and want to be seen in them, do the second. Although, as I have said, it is well to rejoice. Hence, we must always fear sin, and we must always accuse and judge ourselves in the sight of God.<sup>23</sup>

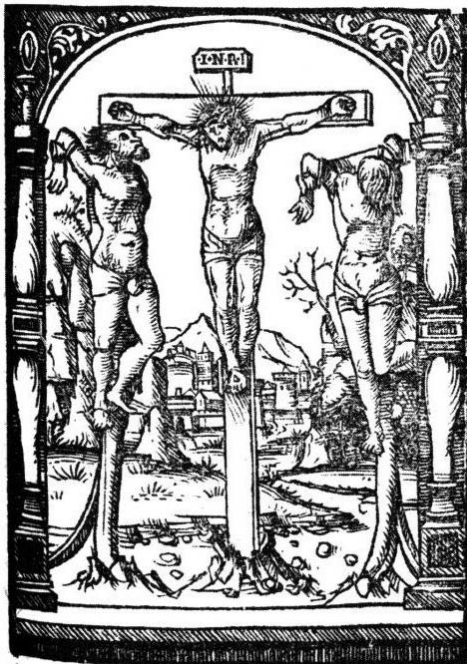
For if we judge ourselves, we shall certainly not be judged by the Lord.<sup>h</sup> For we shall not be judged twice for the same thing. God cannot condemn him who has already been judged by himself and, in consequence, by the words of God. For God cannot deny himself [2 Tim. 2:13], but he has judged this sinner, and the sinner has done the same thing.

Therefore God cannot be against one who is thus judging himself. Otherwise he who agreed with him in judgment would be against himself. For that reason it is necessary that God acknowledge and approve his own judgment in that man.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, it is clear that this psalm was composed, strictly speaking, not about David but prophetically in the person of the church.<sup>25</sup> It was written by David as being part of the church, the

<sup>h</sup> See 1 Cor. 11:31.

occasion having been taken from the story which is mentioned in the title, especially from the fact that David, reprimanded by Nathan, immediately acknowledged and confessed his sin, saying [2 Sam. 12:13]: "I have sinned." Hence, it is this very thing which he here adduces. *For I acknowledge my iniquity* (v. 5). There he has come to understand that to accuse himself means to justify God and, consequently, himself as well. Not so Saul. When he was rebuked by Samuel he said [1 Sam. 15:20]: "To the contrary, I have obeyed the voice of the LORD."<sup>26</sup> He was a symbol of the synagogue. Like him it was thrust from the face to the rear,<sup>27</sup> from the life-giving spirit to the dead letter.<sup>28</sup>



In this woodcut illustrating sermons by Johann Eck (1527), Jesus is crucified between two thieves.

called to make these words their very own.

**26.** To be sure, Saul does actually confess to the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 15, but only after initially denying his sin and hearing the prophet's condemnation. However, Samuel does not accept Saul's reluctant confession as sincere, and this seems at least in part to provide the point of departure for Luther's negative use of his example here.

**27.** That is, from the "face" of God to the "backside," or from God's grace and favor to God's wrath and judgment.

**28.** Luther is concerned herewith fundamental types of the human being's stance before God. In immediately confessing to God and crying out for forgiveness, King David symbolizes faithful Israel and, just so, the Christian church. King Saul, on the other hand, in his self-assertive pride, symbolizes the faithless synagogue, by which Luther seems to mean the Jews after their rejection of Jesus as the Christ. One Jew, then, symbolizes repentance and faith, while the other represents prideful self-assertion and unbelief. One should prefer, therefore, to be a David rather than a Saul.

Luther extends this symbolic reading of biblical figures in the interpretation that follows, where the two thieves crucified with Jesus represent these two types as well: the first is a "Saul" who dies judging and blaspheming against God, but the other is a "David" who submits to God's judgment, condemns himself, and so finds God's forgiveness and dies in the hope of Paradise.

**29.** The second of the two thieves here acknowledges that they have been properly condemned for wrongdoing, while Jesus has been wrongly condemned and suffers unjustly.

**30.** Luther alludes powerfully here to apocalyptic expectations after death or at the end of history, when Christ is met as fearsome judge, and when "every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail" (Rev. 1:7). In the final consummation, moreover, Christ will be universally acknowledged, even by those who rejected him, for "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth . . ." (Phil. 2:10).

Observe a figure of this matter in Christ hanging on the cross. One robber judges, condemns, and blasphemes him; the other judges himself and justifies Christ, saying [Luke 23:41]: "We indeed justly," that is, *against you alone have I sinned*, "but this man has done no evil," behold, *that you may be justified* (v. 6).<sup>29</sup> Even if he is not justified, but judged, he overcomes nevertheless, and he will be justified, even if by the unwilling. Those who now do not want to accuse themselves and justify God, when they are chosen in gentleness and goodness, will finally do this when they are overcome by power and severity, namely, after death and in the last judgment.<sup>30</sup>

However, this insight is useful not only for this verse or this psalm but for all, wherever there is recollection of the praise and righteousness and glory of God. For God cannot be praised, justified, glorified, magnified, admired, etc., unless we ourselves are at the same time, and even beforehand, disparaged, accused, and put to shame, and vice versa. Where our shame and accusation are in evidence, there the praise of God and the remembrance of his righteousness become a reality.

A sample of the first kind	<p>"Thy praise reaches to the ends of the earth" etc., Ps. 48[:10]          and from the following psalm [Ps. 50:23], "The sacrifice of praise"          and "Praise, ye children" [Ps. 113:1]          Also, wherever there is Hallelujah</p>
A sample of the second kind	<p>"Let them be confounded and ashamed" [Ps. 35:4; 40:14; 70:2]          "When they shall be confounded and put to shame" [Ps. 71:24]          "His work is praise and magnificence" [Ps. 111:3]</p>

*Create in me a clean heart, O God* (v. 12). A wonderful and notable word! I mean, many do not commit sins, but only good deeds, and nevertheless the most subtle kind of pride alone, born of their own virtues, has soiled them.<sup>31</sup> Therefore he does not say, cleanse the hand, eyes, feet, tongue, ears, flesh, because with regard to these someone is perhaps not yet sinning, but only his heart is puffed up and soiled. So also the *right spirit* (that is, I am now speaking tropologically,<sup>32</sup> beyond what was said literally in

**31.** Persistence in the prayer that God will create within one a clean heart is here placed at the very center of life for all those who, like the young Luther and his brother Augustinians, had devoted themselves to the pursuit of holiness through the disciplines of the monastic life. Why? Because as he notes here, wickedness can subtly posit itself precisely through the pride that grows almost unobserved just below the surface of the good works of such morally serious persons, in their very hearts. Crying out to God, "create in me a clean heart," therefore, brings with it a perpetual return to the wellsprings of the Christian life in the form of the confession of sin, even—no, especially!—for those who are most practiced in the virtues. The most holy persons thus continually confess themselves sinners, in part because they know how dangerous it is not to do so.

**32.** The tropological sense of Scripture is the meaning that applies to the reader morally, edifying her in the strengths of character that make for a faithful Christian life.

33. The notion that the beginning of sin is to be found in pride is prominent in the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430; see the image on this page), the great late ancient patron of Luther's monastic order. Luther reprises it inventively here, noting that pride means making one's self one's first concern. In this way pride corrupts monastic mortifications, making of them not humble self-sacrifices offered out of love for God, but, to the contrary, the ironic means of self-assertion and, therefore, self-justification. In his heart, the prideful monk remains curved in upon himself, focused, that is, on his own achievements and rewards.

34. Luther refers here to heretics in the region known as Bohemia (part of the Czech Republic today). These were followers of Jan Hus (1369–1415), a church reformer who was put to death at the Council of Constance in 1415. After 1520, Luther recognized that his own reforms had much in common with those recommended by Hus. See the image on p. 227.

the gloss), for some indeed live in the spirit and mortify the flesh, but their spirit is bent and curved in on themselves<sup>i</sup> for empty glory and pride.<sup>33</sup>



In this engraving from a 1680 publication, St. Augustine holds a flaming heart in his right hand. This great theologian of the heart famously wrote: "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you."

Without doubt such were some heretics who led a very chaste life, and today our neighbors, the Bohemians,<sup>34</sup> who outdo us in almost every kind of purity, except for the heart, which spiritual pride has soiled. And this is the devil's choice food. For though he is himself completely unclean, he chooses to dwell in a clean

<sup>i</sup> The phrase "curved in on oneself" is found both in Augustine and in St. Bernard's mystical theology, and either may be Luther's source. See Étienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1940), 54. For the frequent use of the phrase *in se curvatos*, see LW 25:291, 313, 345, 351, 513.



place. He says: "I will ascend the mountain of the north."<sup>35</sup> Thus, it is a horror to consider this bottomless and terrifying judgment of God that many heretics were so learned, outwardly so holy and most skilled in the Scriptures, and on account of this inmost filthiness of the heart alone every such synagogue was rejected and defiled.<sup>36</sup>

But note: If God is to be justified in his words, by which he declares that we are sinners, He must also be justified in his deeds, by which he asserts the same thing. But these works are scourges and crosses. When they come upon us, they are like the word of God accusing and opposing our sin. Therefore they must be received with all fear and humility, and we must confess to him, for he is righteous in his works. For thus he says through the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah: "I will correct thee in judgment; lest thou seem innocent to thyself" (Jer. 46:28; cf. Isa. 38:16). Always there are left in us also some remnants of



This engraving (c. 1464) depicts the burning of Jan Hus at the Council of Constance in 1415. Hus had received a pass guaranteeing him safe conduct to and from the council, but was nevertheless burned at the stake after his conviction in a heresy trial.

35. Bringing the devil into his discussion of heresy, Luther alludes here to Isa. 14:13. He may have gotten this reference from a sermon of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) (Sermons on the Song of Songs, #17), in which Bernard discusses the ins and outs of life in the spirit and the devil's envy of the human race, citing for support Isa. 14:13. For more on the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux on Luther, see Theo M. M. A. C. Bell, *Divus Bernhardus: Bernhard von Clairvaux in Martin Luther's Schriften* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1993); Franz Posset, *Pater Bernhardus: Martin Luther and Bernard of Clairvaux* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1999).



St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) adores the Man of Sorrows.

Woodcut by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Bernard was a lifelong favorite of Luther.

Some have attributed key elements in Luther's "evangelical breakthrough" to what he learned reading Bernard.

36. Luther's use here of "every such synagogue" as a symbol for heretics suggests that the Jews function for him archetypally, as those who are guilty of

spiritual pride. Thus, he classes prideful Christians and prideful Jews together as one type. Luther also uses the phrase to shame Christian heretics for, in effect, making the same error as the Jews.

**37.** Luther here makes the Old Testament story of the attacks of the Jebusites against the people of Israel an allegory for the external afflictions—"scourges and crosses"—God visits upon the faithful in order to purge them of their remaining sin.

sins, namely, of an evil drive and impulse toward wrath, pride, gluttony, and sloth, which are sins in the sight of God, evil and worthy of condemnation, and therefore they must always be punished. So it was with the Jebusites of old on the borders of the children of Israel. Because of them, since they were unable to drive them out, the Israelites were often punished with wars, famine, etc., yes, and enticed to sins.<sup>37</sup>

*O LORD, open my lips* (v. 17). This properly belongs to the church, because the mouth of the whole Scripture has now been opened and the praise of Christ is publicly proclaimed. But it is opened by faith, without which it is closed, and silent, as it is written: "I have believed, therefore have I spoken" (Ps. 116:10). For faith opens the mouth especially toward God (thus we are now speaking) and concerning God speaking in truth.

*Against you I have sinned* (v. 6). Why not "against me"? Does not sin harm me and lead to my wretchedness? But it is "against you," that is, "before you," as if to say [Ps. 143:2]: "Even if I should be innocent and holy before men, still I have sinned before you; I am both a sinner and I have done evil, 'for no man living shall be justified in your sight.'"<sup>j</sup>

Thus to you	{	I am a liar	so that you maybe	{	truthful, Rom. 3[:4]: "God is truthful, but every
		I am evil			human being is a liar."
		I am stupid			good, Luke 11[:13]: "You are evil, only God is good."
		I am blind			wise, 1 Cor. 3[:18]: "Whoever wishes to be wise,
		I have fallen			let him become a fool."
		I am wretched			seeing, John 9[:41]: "If you were blind, you would
		I am nothing			not have sin."

<sup>j</sup> A quote from another of the penitential psalms. See Ps. 143:2.