

# ALIVE TO GOD: CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

## Study Six

### SIN AND OURSELVES

Now that we have been crucified with Christ and raised with him—now that we have recognised the necessity for that to happen, and have found in it the immensity and the sureness of God’s mercy and grace—how do we now regard ourselves, particularly in relation to the sin that we have been delivered from?

We may wish to think that this sin is now behind us: it has been dealt with, and we can now move on. This is true, in that the guilt of our sin has been taken and we are no longer bound by it. We have been cleansed from the defilement of our sin, and we need fear no punishment on account of it.<sup>1</sup> Any sin we now look at is that which has been paid for, cleansed and disempowered. Does this mean, however, that we now totally disregard it?

It could be that now, for the first time, we see our sin as it really is, in a way we never could before. This is a salutary revelation, which leaves us rightly humbled, and enables us to have a sober and realistic estimate of who we are and what we are capable of, along with an unforgettable appreciation of the greatness of our salvation. Both the Bible and what has come to us through Christian history tell us that this revelation is not to be eschewed, but rather is to be embraced in the grace of God. Indeed, not to do so may be to place ourselves and others in great danger, and cause grievous harm.

In this study we will look at ourselves in relation to our sin; in a later study we will work through the implications of this for how we regard and act towards the sins of others.

### YOU SHALL REMEMBER YOUR EVIL WAYS

In Ezekiel 36, God promises Israel a marvellous restoration:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations (Ezek. 36:25–30).

It could be taken from this that all is now well, and all vestige of sin has now been removed, and is to be regarded no more. But that is not the case, for it immediately goes on to say:

---

<sup>1</sup> See Ps. 32:5, ‘you forgave the guilt of my sin’; 1 John 1:7, ‘the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin’; 1 John 4:10, 18, ‘In this is love . . . that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins . . . perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment’. Geoffrey Bingham speaks helpfully of Christ taking away the *penalty*, *pollution*, and *power* of sin: its continuing *presence* in this life is another matter, which we will examine in a later study.

Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds (Ezek. 36:31).

This is not a prior shame that brings us to repentance and cleansing. This is clearly a shame that follows from it, and remains with us. We may think that God forgives us so that we may then feel good about ourselves, with a positive self-image and a high sense of self-esteem. It may come as a puzzling shock to us when God assures us that any such needs of ours are not what He had in mind when He cleansed us, to fit us for Himself and His great purposes. It is rather ‘for the sake of my holy name’, to ‘sanctify my great name’ and to ‘display my holiness’ before the eyes of the nations among which we have profaned it, that He has taken action (Ezek. 36:22, 23):

It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways, O house of Israel (Ezek. 36:32).

I recall a time when I was seeking to convey the totality of our forgiveness in Christ to some Pitjantjatjara people in central Australia. On one particular visit, in conjunction with a translator, I settled on a phrase from their language *kunta wia*, which means ‘no shame’. In a culture where much behaviour is governed by shame, this seemed to give powerful expression to our new-found freedom in Christ, and appeared to evoke a response. Apart from the fact that I was here confusing shame with guilt,<sup>2</sup> before I left I came across this passage from Ezekiel 36 which God’s great salvation and restoration of us, far from leaving us in a position of having ‘no shame’, brings us to be ashamed and dismayed for our ways. I showed it to the translator, and left him with the conundrum.<sup>3</sup>

### **Questions for Reflection:**

- *What has been our expectation regarding the forgiveness of sins and feeling good about ourselves? How is this confronted by Ezekiel 36:31–32?*
- *What is the difference, and the connection, between guilt and shame?*

## **LET ME NEVER BE CONFOUNDED**

Is there not a sense in which we are freed from the shame of our sins through the forgiveness that has come to us? There are passages that speak of an end to our shame, but we need to be mindful of the actual words used, and their original context. Peter says of our faith in Christ:

For it stands in scripture:

‘See, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious;  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame’  
(1 Pet. 2:6; quoting Isa. 28:16).

---

<sup>2</sup> See the examination in Deane Meatheringham, *Naked, Yes, But Not Ashamed*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1978, pp. 8–9. We may refine the issues here a little more than Deane does there.

<sup>3</sup> I later discovered that *kunta wia* is also used of, for instance, a girl who flirts with boys: ‘She’s got no shame’—in the proper sense of shame. This could have accounted for the apparent response. So, overall, this was not a particularly helpful venture into contextualisation of the gospel!

The word for ‘put to shame’ here has the sense of being brought to dishonour and disgrace, to frustration and disappointment.<sup>4</sup> An old translation of the ancient Christian hymn *Te Deum laudamus* in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* ends with the words:

O Lord, in thee have I trusted: let me never be confounded.<sup>5</sup>

This has been more recently translated:

In you, Lord, is our hope:  
Let us never be put to shame.<sup>6</sup>

To be ‘put to shame’, in the sense of being ‘confounded’ or defeated, is not the same thing as having a right sense of shame on account of our sins. In this same hymn we find a prayer to ‘Keep us today, Lord, from all sin’ and to ‘Have mercy on us’. It is prayed by a people who have a keen awareness of their sin, to the extent that they know their need for God’s continuing mercy and ongoing protection in this regard, yet who nevertheless trust that God’s love and mercy are such that they will not finally be brought to confusion and defeat on account of their sins.

Compare this, from ‘The Order for the Burial of the Dead’ in the same *Book of Common Prayer*:

In the midst of life we are in death: of whom may we seek for succour, but of thee, O Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased?

Yet, O Lord God most holy, O Lord most mighty, O holy and most merciful Saviour, deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death.

Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts; shut not thy merciful ears to our prayer; but spare us, Lord most holy, O holy and merciful Saviour, thou most worthy Judge eternal, suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from thee.

This sounds strangely to our ‘modern’ ears, and has been omitted from later versions of the funeral service. It is to be heard, not as an attempt at ingratiating on the part of those who are still not sure of their salvation and are outside of it, hoping to come in, but as those who already know God’s saving grace, and so are acutely aware of their sin, yet have confidence to pray for this final deliverance, and ask to be kept in this faith-relationship with God right to the end.

We need to remember that 1 Peter 2:6—‘whoever believes in him will not be put to shame’—is quoting from Isaiah 28:16. The meaning of the Hebrew in Isaiah 28:16 is ‘will never be dismayed’ (NIV); ‘will never be stricken with panic’ (TNIV); ‘will not panic’ (NRSV). Being ‘stricken with panic’ here has the sense of ‘hurrying’, rushing here and there, being in a flap or a flurry, with overtones of agitation and bewilderment, over against the rest and repose of faith.<sup>7</sup> Being free from this does not counter the reality of still remembering our evil ways and despising them.

What, then, of Isaiah 54:4?

Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed;  
do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace;  
for you will forget the shame of your youth,  
and the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no more.

---

<sup>4</sup> The same word is used for ‘disgrace’ in 1 Cor. 11:4, 5; and for ‘disappoint’ in Rom. 5:5. Paul also uses it in Rom. 9:33, quoting the same Isaiah passage—‘whoever believes in him will not be put to shame’—in contrast with those who ‘stumble’. So it has here the sense of losing out or being confounded.

<sup>5</sup> See ‘The Order for Morning Prayer’ in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.

<sup>6</sup> Anglican Church of Australia, *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Broughton Books, Alexandria, 1995, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> See J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1993, pp. 233f.

While this uses the same root word, among others, as ‘ashamed’ in Ezekiel 36:32, nevertheless, in this context, it is not referring to the shame of sin so much as to the public humiliation of being a woman without children or husband, which has now been brought to an end. This is a people who, despite their sin, have been vindicated by God in His compassion and righteousness (see Isa. 54:5–17).

**Question for Reflection:**

- *How is it possible to know the shame of sin, and yet not be confounded by it?*

## A PEOPLE HUMBLE AND LOWLY

The Ezekiel 36:31–32 passage is consistent with what God says in Zephaniah 3:11–13:

On that day you shall not be put to shame<sup>8</sup>  
because of all the deeds by which you have rebelled against me;  
for then I will remove from your midst  
your proudly exultant ones,  
and you shall no longer be haughty  
in my holy mountain.  
For I will leave in the midst of you  
a people humble and lowly.  
They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD—  
the remnant of Israel;  
they shall do no wrong  
and utter no lies,  
nor shall a deceitful tongue  
be found in their mouths.  
Then they will pasture and lie down,  
and no one shall make them afraid.

This most desirable outcome, of ‘a people humble and lowly’, free from all self-deceiving illusions, whose secure and settled trust is no longer in themselves but entirely in God and His holy name, by whom alone they have been saved from themselves—this is a people who can then be about participating with God in the carrying out of His will.<sup>9</sup>

Does this mean that we should be bowed and cowering before God? Not at all—in fact the opposite. When Ezekiel rightly fell flat on his face before the Lord, he was told to stand on his feet, so that God could speak with him:

And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me (Ezek. 2:2).

When Job was tempted to shut his mouth and say nothing more (see Job 40:3–5), the Lord required of him better than that:

Gird up your loins like a man;  
I will question you, and you declare to me (Job 40:7).

---

<sup>8</sup> Again, here, in the sense of not being confounded.

<sup>9</sup> See further, Geoffrey Bingham’s treatment of Prov. 30:26 (AV), ‘The conies are but a feeble folk, yet make they their houses in the rocks’, in Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Where Conies Dwell*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1994, which focuses on the power of God and the weakness of human beings.

God restores us, from our vainglorious attempts to be God ourselves, to the true humanity He made us to be, in converse with Himself. In this way we can rightly fulfil Paul's dictum:

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned (Rom. 12:3).

### **Question for Reflection:**

- *What is the relationship between being 'humble and lowly', and holding our head up in the presence of God?*
- *How is a sober estimate of ourselves related to the grace given and the faith assigned?*

## **MARTIN LUTHER: KILLED AND MADE ALIVE**

Fundamental to this sober estimate of oneself is the reality of having been crucified and raised with Christ. Martin Luther was no doubt drawing upon his own experience when he wrote, in an extended explication of his ninety-five theses of 1517:

God works by contraries so that a man feels himself to be lost in the very moment when he is on the point of being saved. When God is about to justify a man, he damns him. Whom he would make alive he must first kill. God's favor is so communicated in the form of wrath that it seems farthest when it is at hand. Man must first cry out that there is no health in him. He must be consumed with horror . . . I know a man who has gone through such pains that had they lasted for one tenth of an hour, he would have been reduced to ashes. In this disturbance, salvation begins. When a man believes himself to be utterly lost, light breaks. Peace comes in the word of Christ through faith. He who does not have this is lost . . .<sup>10</sup>

Let us examine some of those statements in the light of what we have already seen:

God works by contraries so that a man feels himself to be lost in the very moment when he is on the point of being saved.

We saw that this was Isaiah's experience when he saw in the temple a vision of the holiness and glory of God, with the seraphs calling out: he said, 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips'. God sent the seraph with the burning coal from the altar to touch his lips and to cleanse him and to commission him for ministry—to take away his guilt and blot out his sin (see Isa. 6).

When God is about to justify a man, he damns him.

That was Paul's experience on the road to Damascus when he saw the vision of Christ and he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'. At that moment all of Paul's righteousness fell flat to the ground, because the very righteousness and zeal by which he had been persecuting the church—which he thought was a zeal for God—was in fact, deadly enmity against Him. His sin brought him to condemnation and death, through the very law by which Paul thought he was being justified: 'For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ.' In that same moment Paul found himself justified through Christ's death for him (see Gal. 2:19–20;

---

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: Martin Luther*, Lion Publishing, Tring, 1987, pp. 82–83.

compare Rom. 7:9–11; 8:1–4). When we come to God we are left with no leg to stand on—not even to hop on—He takes all of that away, and gives us Himself:

Whom he would make alive he must first kill.

That is what God says in Deuteronomy 32:39: ‘I kill and I make alive’. We saw that there is deliberateness about that order. Until God has killed us, in the deathly state we are in through sin, we cannot know what real life is.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

- *To what extent have we considered that the gospel works on us by improving or extending something that is already there?*
- *What is the difference between that and the reality described here by Martin Luther?*

## **MARTIN LUTHER: THE HEIDELBERG DISPUTATION**

Luther posted his ninety-five theses in Wittenberg at the end of October 1517. In May of the following year, 1518, he was scheduled to give a defence of Augustine’s theology of human depravity in Heidelberg at the triennial gathering of the chapter of Augustinian monks to which he belonged.<sup>11</sup> Here he presented twenty-eight theses, which are very confronting to the sinful human flesh seeking to establish its own dignity—either before or after coming to faith in Christ. We shall examine a number of them.<sup>12</sup>

The third thesis hits us like a brick:

**THESIS 3.** Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.<sup>13</sup>

‘Mortal’ means ‘deadly’, ‘deserving of death’, ‘leading to death’. This is a saying that is virtually incomprehensible to unregenerate human flesh. Regenerate human flesh may find it no less difficult to take. But it accords well with one who, like Paul, knew himself to have been deservedly crucified with Christ. After many years of living by faith in the Son of God, Paul still regarded himself as ‘the foremost’ of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15).<sup>14</sup> Paul said that those ‘who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus . . . have no confidence in the flesh’ (Phil. 3:3). Paul’s version of Luther’s Thesis 3 might well be: ‘So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall’ (1 Cor. 10:12). Just when we think we are doing well is the moment we are in the greatest danger. This is in keeping with Proverbs 28:26 (NKJV): ‘He who trusts in his own heart is a fool’. Once we know ourselves to have been deservedly crucified with Christ, we do well to have a healthy mistrust of anything we do or are capable of doing.

---

<sup>11</sup> See Bainton, *op.cit.*, pp. 86–87.

<sup>12</sup> These are masterfully surveyed in Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1997. See also G. C. Bingham, ‘The Theologies by Which Salvation Is Proclaimed’, NCTM Monday Pastors’ Study Group, 1st June 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Forde, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Some see a downward progression to this from regarding himself as ‘not at all inferior to these super-apostles’ (2 Cor. 12:11), and ‘the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle’ (1 Cor. 15:9). But the ‘I am nothing’ of 2 Cor. 12:11 would indicate that regarding himself as the foremost of sinners was Paul’s settled conviction from the moment of his conversion.

Without this settled attitude, Luther says, our works will be inevitably tainted:

**THESIS 7.** The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God.<sup>15</sup>

Note that Luther here is referring to those who have already been justified through faith in Christ—the ‘righteous’ who have a ‘pious fear of God’. The moment we have regard for something we have done as ‘pretty good’, Luther is saying, we are in mortal danger. Isaiah, after his encounter before the throne of God, would not have simply walked out of the temple saying, ‘OK, I get the message’. What happened to him there had entered into him. For the rest of his life he was before that throne of the holy God, and was walking in that presence ‘out of pious fear of God’. That is where we are, as those who have been crucified with Christ. It is best not to trust anything that we do, finally and fully, as if it were some great thing.

Luther continued to press the point home:

**THESIS 11.** Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work.<sup>16</sup>

Again, this sounds harsh and strong to our ears. We may hear it implying that we are to be walking on eggshells all the time out of fear that we might lose our salvation. Luther certainly was not someone who was trying to walk on eggshells all the time! He had a robust faith in his Saviour that enabled him to say things as they are, fearlessly, in a very earthy fashion. Take, for instance, the full context of his oft-quoted ‘sin boldly’ in a letter he wrote to Philip Melancthon:

If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but the true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. **Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong (sin boldly), but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.** We will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides. We, however, says Peter (2 Peter 3:13) are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign.<sup>17</sup>

Martin Luther had a deep confidence in God, and a deep absence of any confidence in himself, which was well founded. If the judgement of condemnation is not feared in all we do—if that possibility is not there in our minds, not in a fearful way but simply in a realistic way—then arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present, because true hope is hope in God, not in ourselves. We have no righteousness but the righteousness of God by which we stand in Christ.

Luther proceeds by stating ‘contraries’ that, rightly considered, make good sense:

**THESIS 12.** In the sight of God sins are then truly venial when they are feared by men to be mortal.<sup>18</sup>

‘Venial’ means ‘forgivable’—that is, by virtue of the grace of God in Christ. In other words, if we are strutting out and doing lots of stuff and not fearing God in it at all, then it’s because we have already fallen in a hole. We are on firmer ground if we are realising that we have no

---

<sup>15</sup> Forde, p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> Forde, p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> Letter 99, paragraph 13. Erika Bullmann Flores, tr. from: *Dr. Martin Luther's Saemmtliche Schriften*, Dr. Johann Georg Walch ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, n.d.), vol. 15, cols. 2585–2590. Accessed through <[http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Martin\\_Luther](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Martin_Luther)> on 28th January 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Forde, p. 46.

confidence in ourselves to be able to do anything good, but we do have absolute confidence in God to do His works in us. Then, whether we do right or wrong, we are in God. Whatever we do amiss will be covered already by the wonderful forgiveness, because we are in that holy presence of God—the One who brings the hot coal to our lips. So we can live boldly and fully. There is a whole attitude of heart here which we can know only when we are not just looking at the cross, but are in the cross—crucified with Christ.

So we may be rightly suspicious of our own motives and actions, not in a self-destroying way but simply in a real way. If ever we find ourselves justifying ourselves in some action, then it is likely we are on the wrong ground. Someone has said that the real test of those who know that they are justified by Christ is that they never have to justify themselves. They never have to set out to do that, because their justification—right or wrong—is already secured in Christ.

We are able to be this way because, now that we have been impacted by the cross, we take seriously our fallen condition. We realise how far we have gone: we have fallen short of the glory of God. Our will, by which we have determined to rebel against God, cannot be trusted—that which P. T. Forsyth described as our final stronghold of resistance against God: ‘our will is our dearest life, the thing we cling to most and give up last’.<sup>19</sup> As he did later against the humanist Erasmus, Luther asserted that our wills are not free:

**THESIS 13.** Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do it commits a mortal sin.<sup>20</sup>

As long as our will is operating out of itself, all our choices will be awry. This will always be the case, whether before or after we are redeemed.

Luther does acknowledge that we are capable of doing good, but only as that is given to us from God:

**THESIS 14.** Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity, but it can always do evil in an active capacity.<sup>21</sup>

This accords with what Jesus said to the rich young man: ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’ (Mark 10:18)—all goodness is from God, including Jesus’ own goodness—and with what Paul says: ‘I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it’ (Rom. 7:18). What did Luther mean by ‘a passive capacity’? In his proof of this thesis he used this example: a corpse could be said to have a passive capacity for life because it can be raised from the dead!<sup>22</sup> This makes clear that life, and goodness, can come only by divine power, from outside. Even as a redeemed person, Paul had to say: ‘when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand’ (Rom. 7:21).<sup>23</sup> This dynamic is what led him to cry out: ‘Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?’ (Rom. 7:24).

Even before the fall, Luther rightly insists, the human will had an incapacity to do good of itself:

**THESIS 15.** Nor could free will remain in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, 1910, reprinted NCPI, Blackwood, 1984, p. 192.

<sup>20</sup> Forde, p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> Forde, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> Forde, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> We will examine the whole of Romans 7 in a later study.

<sup>24</sup> Forde, p. 56.

Jesus himself said to his Father, ‘Not my will but yours be done’ (Luke 22:42). The myth of our ‘independence’ as human beings is the great lie perpetrated by Satan, and the great sin on the part of human beings. Even in our original created state we were dependent on and in relationship with God for all things—life and goodness included. If this was the case before we sinned, how much more is it the case afterwards—including the time after we have been redeemed, while in this life evil still remains close at hand? Our so-called ‘freewill’ is not innocent. We make choices that are very self-interested. We can acknowledge what is right, but when we try to put that into effect, it often doesn’t work out that way. Even our motives are never entirely unmixed.

Sometimes we try to make up for that by trying harder from ourselves to lift our game. Luther says that this only makes matters worse:

**THESIS 16.** The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.<sup>25</sup>

As long as we are trusting ourselves to somehow get it right, Luther’s words will give us no comfort. All our comfort is to be found only in Christ and in his saving gospel:

**THESIS 17.** Nor does speaking in this manner give cause for despair, but for arousing the desire to humble oneself and seek the grace of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

That is so simple, and beautiful. All that Luther says in these theses should arouse in us the desire and the absolute necessity and the unavoidable need to humble ourselves and seek the grace of Christ, which is so good and true. What does God say in Isaiah 66:2?

this is the one to whom I will look,  
to the humble and contrite in spirit,  
who trembles at my word.

There is a despair that we may rightly have:

**THESIS 18.** It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

Here we are back to something very like the reality of being crucified with Christ. But, as we have been seeing, this is a ‘despair’ that is to be maintained also after we have received the grace of Christ. Anything else is based on a prideful falsehood.

This is not to say that we will never produce anything that is good. We have been made to participate in the very works of God, through our faith-relationship with Him:

**THESIS 26.** The law says, ‘do this,’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is already done.<sup>28</sup>

This is consistent with the words of Jesus, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent’ (John 6:29), and that ‘the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do’ (John 14:12); and the words of Peter, that we ‘may become participants of the divine nature’ (2 Pet. 1:4).

---

<sup>25</sup> Forde, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> Forde, p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> Forde, p. 65.

<sup>28</sup> Forde, p. 107.

Luther, however, leaves us in no doubt as to where these works come from:

**THESIS 27.** Rightly speaking, therefore, the work of Christ should be called the operative power, and our work, the operation; so our operation is pleasing to God by the grace of the operative power.<sup>29</sup>

The ‘operative power’ is the work of Christ—on the cross, and right through history—and our work is the operation of the operative power, which is the work of Christ, and is thereby pleasing to God.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

- *What cherished notions of ours do these theses set out to demolish?*
- *Where do we find ourselves with regard to these theses?*

## **TO PROMOTE HIS GLORY**

Even so, we are well advised not to set much store by anything that we do. How much is anything we do really worth? Such an assessment is not up to us, but is up to God. And, whether it is ‘worth’ something or not, the issue is how God handles it according to His good purpose. I have always been moved by this little story of Jean Nicholas Grou, who was a faithful Roman Catholic priest in France at the troubled time of the French Revolution in the 1790’s:

Père Grou was the author of various works, classical as well as theological. One of the latter, ‘*Traité dogmatique de la vraie religion*,’ undertaken at the request of Monseigneur de Beaumont, Archbishop of Paris, and costing fourteen years of labour, was burnt at Paris sometime later. On receiving the tidings, Père Grou’s only remark was, ‘If the work could serve God, He would have preserved it; but He will make use of some other more profitable servant than I am, to promote His Glory.’<sup>30</sup>

We can see from this that he had absolutely no self-interest at all in what he’d been doing—all had been to the glory of God.<sup>31</sup> It is not as if he had written this great theological work off his own bat. All of it was godly work:

He never began to write without praying that his work might be blessed, nor can we wonder that he believed himself to be guided by God to labour for His Glory. ‘I write nothing of myself,’ he says; ‘God directs my pen; I often take it up not knowing what I am about to say, and sometimes I marvel at the thoughts suggested to me. If God gives me “*de quoi*,” I write freely; if not, I wait His Will.’ During his latter years he ceased to write, saying that ‘God did not give him *de quoi*.’<sup>32</sup>

So it was fourteen years of God-inspired work lost. But then, that is God’s business.

We can take one step back from that, and admire it as devout piety, or despise it as pitiful weakness. Neither of those come close to where it actually is, in the heart of the cross and the grace of God. We can do the same with Paul’s words of being ‘content with weaknesses . . . for the sake of Christ’, that he may know Christ’s power (see 2 Cor. 11:30–12:10), and still be no closer to the reality.

---

<sup>29</sup> Forde, p. 110.

<sup>30</sup> From the Preface to *The Hidden Life of the Soul*, from the French of Jean Nicholas Grou, ed. W. H. Hutchings, Longmans Green and Co. Ltd, London, 1936, p. v.

<sup>31</sup> And we get upset when our computer dumps a load of stuff that we cannot retrieve!

<sup>32</sup> Grou, pp. v–vi.

Psalms 131 and 123 may hold us in the right place:

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up,  
my eyes are not raised too high;  
I do not occupy myself with things  
too great and too marvelous for me.  
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
like a weaned child with its mother;  
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.  
O Israel, hope in the LORD  
from this time on and forevermore (Ps. 131).

To you I lift up my eyes,  
O you who are enthroned in the heavens!  
As the eyes of servants  
look to the hand of their master,  
as the eyes of a maid  
to the hand of her mistress,  
so our eyes look to the LORD our God,  
until he has mercy upon us.  
Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,  
for we have had more than enough of contempt.  
Our soul has had more than its fill  
of the scorn of those who are at ease,  
of the contempt of the proud (Ps. 123).

Martin Luther received a mixed response to his twenty-eight theses at Heidelberg. One response was: ‘If the peasants heard you say that, they would stone you’.<sup>33</sup> This is the response of the commonality of proud human flesh. On the other hand, Luther was feted by his fellow Augustinian monks for upholding the party line of their great founder (of 1,100 years before), over against the upstart Dominican monks (from only about 300 years before), who were preaching the evil sale of indulgences! This is no less the response of proud human flesh.

I trust that what has come to us here will evoke neither response, but rather might bring us to be humble before God, in the great grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>33</sup> Bainton, p. 86.