

Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John*

Who can reconcile these statements? On the one hand, St. Paul says that man can know God; on the other hand, St. John clearly states that no one has ever seen God, be he ever so wise, clever, and smart, except the only Son of God, who revealed Him to us. . . . You must learn to answer it in the following way: There are two kinds of knowledge of God: the one is the knowledge of the Law; the other is the knowledge of the Gospel. For God issued the Law and the Gospel that He might be known through them.

Reason can arrive at a “legal knowledge” of God. It is conversant with God’s commandments and can distinguish between right and wrong. The philosophers, too, had this knowledge of God. But the knowledge of God derived from the Law is not the true knowledge of Him, whether it be the Law of Moses or the Law instilled into our hearts [i.e., the natural law (Romans 2:15)].

The people do not obey this Law, especially when they look about and see that the greater the rogue, the greater his fortune. They infer that there is no God who punishes sin, and accordingly they follow the crowd bent on sin. Or those who would be the most pious argue: “I will honor father and mother, offend or murder no one, will not defraud anyone or rob him of his wife, child, property, and good name; if I conduct myself in this way, I shall be saved.”

Then from this knowledge of the Law come others, who want to do better but are not nearly as good as the aforementioned; in fact, they do not hold a candle to them. To illustrate, let us take a monk. He depicts God to himself as enthroned in His heaven, tailoring cowls, shaving heads, and manufacturing ropes, coarse shirts, and wooden shoes. And then he imagines that whoever clothes himself in these not only merits heaven for himself but can also help others get to heaven. This is blindness beyond all blindness, as must be apparent to all. . . . Even the heathen are superior to this group.

The other sort of knowledge of God emerges from the Gospel. There we learn that all the world is by nature an abomination before God, subject to God’s wrath and the devil’s power, and is eternally damned. From this the world could not extricate itself except through God’s Son, who lies in the bosom of the Father. He became man, died, and rose again, extinguishing sin, death, and devil. . . . This is the true and thorough knowledge and way of thinking about God; it is called the knowledge of grace and truth, the “evangelical knowledge” of God. But this knowledge does not grow up in our garden, and nature knows nothing at all about it. Reason has only a left-handed and partial knowledge of God, based on the law of nature and of Moses, for the Law is inscribed in our hearts.

The proper way to acquire a knowledge of God is the right-handed one, to know for sure what the thoughts and will of God are. No human being can enlighten you on this. As a matter of fact, the human race stands in need of grace through the Son. Reason is confined to the first type of knowledge of God, which proceeds from the Law, and it speaks a vague language.

For the knowledge of the Law suggests itself automatically and very emphatically when one is terror-stricken or in the agony of death. But the knowledge of God in His grace was revealed from heaven and was otherwise hidden to man.

“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). This is an extraordinarily fine and comforting sermon on Christ, our Savior. Neither our thoughts or words can do the subject full justice, but in the life beyond it will redound to our eternal joy and bliss that the Son of God abased Himself so and burdened Himself with my sins. Yes, He assumes not only my sins but also those of the whole world, from Adam down to the very last mortal. These sins He takes upon Himself; for these He is willing to suffer and die that our sins may be expunged and we may attain eternal life and blessedness.

Therefore a Christian must cling simply to this verse and let no one rob him of it. *For there is no other comfort in heaven or on earth to fortify us against all attacks and temptations, especially in the agony of death.*

Now note that the Law of Moses, indeed, apprises you of your sin and tells you how you should obey God and man. It also informs me that I am hostile to God, that I blaspheme Him, and that I do not regulate my life properly according to the precepts of the Ten Commandments. In brief, the Law shows me what I am; it reveals sin and burdens me with it. This is its proper function. Then I become frightened and would like to be rid of it. But the Law says: “I cannot aid you in this.” . . . But is this not a hideous and terrible blindness? Sin lies at your throat; it drives you and lies heavy on you. Reason knows no other counsel and advice. As soon as reason sees that it has sinned, it declares: “I will reform and become pious!”

In view of this, St. John in his testimony or sermon, shows us Another upon whom God the Father has laid our sins, namely, Christ the Lord. The Law lays them upon me, but God takes them from me and lays them upon this Lamb. There they fit very well, far better than on me. God wishes to say to us: “I see how the sin oppresses you. You would have to collapse under its heavy burden. But I shall relieve and rid you of the load—when the Law convicts you of, and condemns you for, your sin—and from sheer mercy I shall place the weight of your sin on the Lamb, which will bear them.” May you ever cherish and treasure this thought. Christ is made a servant of sin, yea, a bearer of sin, and the lowest and most despised person.

It is extremely important that we know where our sins have been disposed of. The Law deposits them on our conscience and shoves them into our bosom. But God takes them from us and places them on the shoulders of the Lamb. If sin rested on me and on the world, we would be lost; for it is too strong and burdensome. God says: “I know your sin is unbearable for you; therefore behold, I will lay it upon my Lamb and relieve you of it. Believe this! If you do, you are delivered of sin.” . . . These are clear, plain, and powerful words, strengthened by that splendid and beautiful portrait of St. John pointing to the Lamb with his finger.

For the devil will sorely assail your faith in an effort to make you doubt that Christ is the Son of God and that your faith is pleasing to God. He will torture you with thoughts of predestination, with the wrath and the judgment of God. Then you must say: “I don’t want to hear or know anything else about God than that He loves me. I don’t want to know anything about a wrathful God, about His judgment and anger, about hell, about death, and about damnation. But if I do see God’s wrath, I know that this drives me to the Son, where I find refuge, and if I come to the Son, I also have a merciful Father.” For St. John tells us in his epistle that the Father loved me before I ever loved Him, or knew Him, that He remitted my sin and gave me salvation (1 John 4:10).