

LUTHER'S ANSWERS TO ANXIETY

Feeling Down? Here's some advice from Pastor Luther.

by Barbara Owen

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Martin Luther knew from experience what it was to be despondent and anxious. He had bouts with this all his life, and he developed remedies that he shared with others. Today, people who suffer from ongoing depression should seek medical help. But others who feel "down" may find Luther's suggestions helpful.

Martin Luther spent a great deal of time alone in his younger years, and he knew how melancholy thoughts (and the devil) could plague one in times of solitude. Later he told some friends:

"When we are alone, the worst and saddest things come to mind. We reflect in detail upon all sorts of evils. And if we have encountered adversity in our lives, we dwell upon it as much as possible, magnify it, think that no one is so unhappy as we are, and imagine the worst possible consequences.

"In short, when we are alone, we leap to conclusions, and we interpret everything in the worst light. On the other hand, we imagine that other people are very happy, and it distresses us that things go well with them and evil with us."

We might readily agree, but what do we do? Here's one remedy Pastor Luther gives:

"Undertake to do anything else that you are able—whether play or something else—just so that you free yourself from these thoughts," he wrote to a depressed nobleman. By play, he meant games, sports, music, meals—those things we enjoy with others. At times of melancholy, get out and be with friends was his message.

People today who enjoy sports will understand Luther's suggestion to a despondent young prince "to engage in riding and hunting, and to seek the company of others who may be able to rejoice with Your Grace in a godly and honorable way...

"Be merry with them, for gladness and good cheer, when decent and proper, are the best medicine. I myself, who have spent a good part of my life in sorrow and gloom, now seek and find pleasure wherever I can."

Luther himself enjoyed bowling.

He noted that God created these good gifts for us to rejoice in them; God is pleased when we do, giving thanks to Him.

When we are with others who comfort us in times of despondency, Pastor Luther wants us to see this as comfort coming from God. "Do not dwell on your own thoughts," he writes, "but listen to what other people have to say to you. For God has commanded

[us] to comfort [one another], and it is His will that the afflicted should receive such consolation as God's very own."

If we can't be with others, Luther suggested we go "out to the fields and spread the manure; do something downright earthy."

Of course, he found comfort in reading the Bible and in the words of Jesus. Luther suggested that many of the stories of Bible people are there for our comfort. He spoke about Noah and his family:

"It was no joke or laughing matter for them to live shut up in the ark for so long, to see the endless masses of rain, to be tossed about by the waves and to drift. In these circumstances, there was the feeling that God had forgotten them. All their circumstances compelled them to debate whether God was favorably inclined and wanted to remember them. Therefore, although they overcame these hardships, they did not overcome them without awful affliction.

"Let us, then, remember that this story sets before us an example of faith, perseverance and patience in order that those who have the divine promise may not only learn to believe it but may also realize that they need perseverance."

It is at such times that prayer is important. Pastor Luther understood the difference between worry and prayer; Psalm 118 was instructive for him. "This psalm has often been an outstanding remedy for me against the plots and wiles of the devil," he wrote to a friend.

In a commentary on the psalm for lay people, he commented on verse 5—"I called upon the Lord."

"You must learn to call," Luther wrote. "Do not sit by yourself or lie on a couch, hanging and shaking your head. Do not destroy yourself with your own thoughts by worrying. Do not strive and struggle to free yourself. Mourn and pray as this verse teaches... It is (God's) desire and will that you lay your troubles before Him. He does not want you to multiply your troubles by burdening and torturing yourself."

Luther would also say that prayer is never so strong as when we are in church with other Christians.

Sometimes prayer at despondent times is best done with music. Music is another remedy for melancholy, he noted in a letter to a depressed friend. "When you are sad ... and when melancholy threatens to get the upper hand, say, 'Arise! I must play a song unto the Lord ... for the Scriptures teach us that it pleases Him to hear a joyful song...' Then begin striking the keys and singing in accompaniment, as David and Elisha did, until your sad thoughts vanish." And if they return, sing and play some more, Luther advised.

Music, Bible reading and prayer, sports, gardening and getting out with friends are Luther's remedies against, anxiety and sadness. One more is to remember again and again that you are baptized, you belong to God, you are one of the saints of God.

But sins make us forget, and we get despondent. "You say that the sins we commit every day offend God, and therefore we are not saints. To this I reply: Mother love is stronger than the filth and scabbiness on a child, and so the love of God toward us is stronger than the dirt that clings to us," Luther explained.

And again, he wrote, "Rest assured that [Christ loves] you, the Father loves you, and the Holy Spirit, who is sent to you, loves you."

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