

# The Impact of Psalm 71 on Dr. Martin Luther's Tower Experience

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This paper's purpose is to examine the impact Psalm 71 had on Martin Luther's tower experience. But before one can exegetically determine this Psalm's effect on him one must have an understanding of Luther's spiritual development that led to this life-changing experience.

Dr. Martin Luther's early Christian Education filled him with a spiritual attitude basic to Medieval piety. He was trained to depend on both saints and sacraments to gain access to God. The most powerful spiritual force that influenced his life occurred at the University of Erfurt. The professors who taught him from the time he began the University of Erfurt to study Law until the time he began to prepare for his Doctorate were followers of the Via Moderna. The main teachers of this scholastic school were Duns Scotus, William of Occam and Gabriel Biel. These intellectual giants had rebelled against Thomas Aquinas' view that man's reason can comprehend God. They taught that man can't gain access to God through reason but through making one's self acceptable to God. They believed an individual is able to do their best to please God. When they reach that point God blesses them with co-operating grace. From that time on they work with God's grace until they have done their best in that effort. Then God grants them saving grace, assuring them of salvation. While these teachers can be praised for leading Luther to elevate the Bible above human reason, they must be condemned for the doubts they passed on to their students. No wonder Luther lived in fear of sudden death. He was positive he hadn't even reached the first level of having done well enough to co-operate with God's grace. Cutting himself deeply with a knife and then being terrified by the thunderstorm drove him to the monastery in 1505. There he saw the possibility of reaching the level where he could begin cooperating with God's grace and eventually be assured of God's saving grace.

Martin Luther's term as a novitiate proceeded without any noticeable incidents. Either the hard work took his mind off himself, or he was positive that he was making spiritual progress. This peaceful interlude came to an abrupt halt when he said his first mass in 1507. During the consecration of the elements his sins began overpowering him again as he came face to face with Jesus' pure holy presence in the Sacrament of the Altar. Later Luther's father added to Luther's burden of sin. He accused Luther of breaking the 4th Commandment by entering the monastery instead of becoming a lawyer. When Martin tried to explain, his father Hans let loose a vicious blow to his son's spiritual security. He asked if the devil, not God had come to Martin in that thunderstorm. Martin Luther was again convinced by his experiences that day that he had not reached the first level of grace demanded by the Occamists. He couldn't say he was doing his best to please God.

A spiritual storm began raging in Luther's soul. The more different ways he tried to quell the storm the more furiously it would roar. He tried literally to beat back his sins through hard work, fasting and torturing his body. But that only increased his frustration as sin proceeded unabated in his heart and mind. He tried to gain the forgiveness of sins by constantly going to confession. But the moment he was through confessing he would only remember even more sins. The frustration increased. His trip to Rome in 1510 gained him no spiritual peace. For as he climbed the stairs supposedly used by Jesus on His way to the cross, Martin reportedly asked himself, "Who knows whether it is true?" Luther attempted to find spiritual calm through mysticism. Mystics taught that one may find peace by separating their soul from their body in order to unite their soul with God's majesty. Luther succeeded in attaining a state of rapture. But when he confronted a pure, holy God with his impure, corrupt soul despair seized him to an even greater degree.

About this time the kind, friendly Johann Staupitz entered Martin Luther's life. Staupitz enjoyed a moderating philosophy inherited from Thomas Aquinas. Staupitz guided Luther away from himself to the cross of Christ. Contrary to Biel, Staupitz believed that Christianity begins with love for God, not love for self. Love for God, according to Staupitz, could not be produced by any human effort. God had to make individuals members of the elect. God included individuals among the elect by means of the 7 Sacraments. From then on a person could know he was among the elect by his Christian conduct. Like Aquinas, Staupitz believed that the sacraments infused God's grace into individuals. Then those individuals would have the ability to produce good works that proved they were Christians. Moving Luther's concentration from himself to Jesus' innocent death on

the cross was Staupitz' major, positive contribution. Yet Staupitz added much to Luther's already troubled soul. Staupitz believed that a person could never be sure of his salvation. His emphasis on good works as the test to determine whether a person was among the elect brought Luther further anxiety concerning his lack of good works. Staupitz was never able to shake free from his own dependence on good works. In a book published after his death he condemns anyone that puts confidence in faith alone, without works, for salvation. In spite of this, Luther still thanked Staupitz for setting him on the path to the Gospel.

From 1509 until 1511 Luther began his studies that led to his doctorate. This period was devoted to lecturing on the Sentences of Peter Lombard. Marginal notes in his copy of the Sentences reveal his total dependence on the theology of Biel and Occam. Along with them Luther believed man had the natural power to do good. He made careful distinction between the works done before God infused His grace and the works done after God infused His grace. The difference to Luther was that before God infused His grace man used his natural powers to produce good works to the best of his ability. When man reached the point that he was doing his best, he earned the grace God poured into him. From then on man's natural power to do good cooperated with God. It was during that time or shortly after that time Staupitz began influencing Luther. Only a few letters during that period between 1511 and 1513 are available. What Luther experienced during those two years is left to conjecture.

The true meaning of the Gospel came to Luther from God sometime during the spring or summer of 1513. He had received his Doctorate in the Fall of 1512. He was preparing to lecture on the Psalms for the school year beginning in the fall of 1513. He would go through the Psalms thirty at a time. First he prepared the Glosses. These were grammatical notes. Then he would go through the same Psalms a second time, preparing the Scholia. This was the practical application of the Psalms. Luther used well-known works of his time to prepare. He had a commentary on the penitential Psalms and a Hebrew grammar by Reuchlin. Luther used other commentaries by Faber Stapulenzis, Nicolas of Lyra, Paul of Burgos and Lefevre d' Etaples. Many times in his practical application Luther also refers to St. Augustine's commentary on the Psalms. Sadly, Luther paid more attention to Faber's allegorization than to Lyra's literal interpretation of the Psalms. According to Medieval exegetes every Bible passage would have a fourfold meaning. The least important of these even to Luther at this time was the literal meaning. Then there was the allegory in which people and places were labeled with some future meaning usually a reference to Christ. Then followed the tropological interpretation. This was the moral instruction to be derived from the passage. Finally each passage was given an anagogical interpretation. This had something to do with the final judgment of the world. One happy note is that as Luther progressed through the Psalms his reliance on this form of exegesis decreased.

This brings us to his study of the Psalms. Most biographers agree that the Psalms began changing his spiritual outlook as early as the 31st Psalm. It began especially with Psalm 31:2 (30 in the Vulgate). This verse reads: בַּךְ יְהוָה הִסִּיתִי אֶל־אֲבוֹשָׁה לְעוֹלָם בְּצַדִּיקְתְּךָ פִּלְטָנִי. The translation is, "In You, O Lord I have trusted, don't let me be ashamed forever. In Your righteousness deliver me. הִסִּיתִי is a Qal, perfect which reveals David's permanent trust in God. אֶל־אֲבוֹשָׁה is a Qal imperfect perfect from בּוֹשׁ used as a prohibition. פִּלְטָנִי is a Piel imperative. David is making a demand on God according to God's righteousness. This verse greatly troubled Luther. His only conception of God's righteousness was His righteous judgment of unrighteous sinners. He had been using Augustine's commentary on the Psalms. But apparently Augustine's remarks on this verse went right past Luther. Augustine had written, "Because thou hast not discovered in me any justice (righteousness) of my own, rescue me in thine; that is let that rescue me which imparts justification, which makes an ungodly man godly, an unrighteous man righteous...."<sup>1</sup> In Luther's interpretation of the Psalm for his class he makes no mention of this verse. The only verse he comments on is verse 6. His first glance at this passage mentioning God's righteousness led Luther to rage against God.<sup>2</sup> At this point Luther was definitely blind to the free act of justification God provides all sinners for the sake of Jesus' perfect life and innocent

<sup>1</sup> *St. Augustine on the Psalms*, translated by Dame Scholastica Helgin and Dame Felicita Corrigan, Paulist Press, New York, page 17

<sup>2</sup> Heinrich Boehmer, *Martin: Luther: Road to Reformation*, translated by John Dobberstein and Theodore Tappert, World Publishing, Cleveland, page 109

death. But at least Luther had reached the stage of trying to understand just what the Psalmist meant by "God's righteousness."

As Luther worked his way through the rest of the Psalms he often came into contact with verses that mention God's forgiveness. Psalm 32:1 states, "Blessed are they whose iniquities are covered." Luther remarks concerning this passage, "No human being knew that the wrath of God is upon all men and that all are in sins before God, but through His Gospel He has revealed from heaven both how we may be saved from that wrath and by what righteousness we may be set free, namely, through Christ."<sup>3</sup> This quote reveals the influence of Staupitz. Luther wasn't completely looking to man's natural goodness for the ability to become righteous before God. Yet at this point Luther does not state that anyone is totally forgiven and righteous before God for Jesus' sake.

Luther paraphrased Psalm 39:1 to read, "Thy righteousness, that is Thy church that has been justified by Thee and Thy righteousness, is like the mountains composed of great and lofty men or saints." The Psalm verse actually says, "Thy, righteousness is like the mountains."<sup>4</sup> The sense of this paraphrase by Luther seems to be that God declares righteous those saintly enough to be declared righteous. Luther's further spiritual growth reveals itself in his comments concerning Psalm 39:11. This verse reads, "Thou hast corrected man for iniquity." Concerning this phrase Luther first quotes Isaiah 59:5-6 which reads, "They have woven spider webs. Their webs shall not be for clothing; neither shall they cover themselves with their works. Their works are useless." Luther adds to this, "Such are the works of one's own righteousness apart from faith."<sup>5</sup> Luther seems to confess with this remark that human beings are unable to produce anything righteous before God. It seems a denial of man's natural ability to do his best to gain God's favor. He appears to have a Biblical understanding of man's natural condition. He doesn't appear to have taken the leap of faith to believe that God declares the ungodly, godly.

As Luther proceeded through the Psalms he qualifies his belief in man's total depravity. He has extended comments on the phrase, "Deep calls to deep" from Psalm 42:7. He states, "desire for the good is inextinguishable in man, though it may be hindered in many."<sup>6</sup> This remark reveals that Luther did not yet accept the total depravity of natural man. This last statement assumes that Luther in talking previously about "works of one's own righteousness apart from faith" was talking about someone who proudly makes his personal righteousness equal to God's apart from any relationship with God. That Luther was still unclear at this point in his study of the Psalms concerning man's natural state can be readily seen in his remark about Psalm 45:3. The verse is, "Grace is poured upon your lips." Luther's comment on this phrase reveals his ties with Occam and Biel. He writes, "On all these lips grace is poured for they preach such things that unless cooperating grace would come to the hearer at the same time they would achieve no results."<sup>7</sup> As was mentioned before, sinners receive cooperating grace, according to the Occamists, when they have done their best with their natural abilities to please God. This shows that when writing this Luther wasn't ready to turn his back on the Via Moderna.

The phrase "righteousness of God" appears in Psalm 50:6. It reads, "The heavens declare the righteousness of God, for God is Judge." At least Luther doesn't completely avoid this passage concerning God's righteousness like he did in Psalm 31:2. Here he states, "Therefore to declare God as Judge is to announce a universal judgment and that someone else's righteousness, which a person might have before men, is not enough, but the righteousness of God is needed so that a person might be righteous before God."<sup>8</sup> Luther has the standard of God's judgment correct, namely His own righteousness. He is also right in stating that the righteousness anyone might produce to satisfy the eyes of human beings is not enough to satisfy God. But he makes no mention of how one receives that righteousness from God or who receives it. However, even as one

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<sup>3</sup> *Luther's Works*, vol. 10, Concordia, St. Louis, pg. 143.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, page 165.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, page 185.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, page 197.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, page 216.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, page 234.

reads these words of Luther the impression is there that Luther was taking a giant step in the right direction.

The greatest evidence for the giant spiritual step that Dr. Martin Luther took during his tower experience appears in Psalm 51:4. He is writing concerning the phrase, "Against Thee have I sinned, that thou mayest be justified." His comment follows, "Yes, even faith and grace through which we are today justified, would not of themselves justify us if God's covenant did not do it."<sup>9</sup> A little further he adds, "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 justifier."<sup>10</sup> The whole emphasis on man's attempt to justify himself before God has changed to God justifying man through His covenant. Further on concerning the same phrase, Luther comes to the conclusion:

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 ... These things are the marrow of Scripture and the meat of heavenly grace, more desirable than all the glory of riches... I would not substitute the riches of the whole world for such knowledge if I had the option.<sup>11</sup>

Again Luther states, "Where our shame and accusation is in evidence, there the praise of God and the remembrance of His righteousness become a reality." Luther's whole attitude toward God and his personal sins has changed. The joyful tone of what he wrote concerning Psalm 51 reveal that change. These words confess that Luther actually understood that to be ashamed of one's sins was to praise God. Gladness and excitement literally jump out from his commentary on this phrase from Psalm 51. The tower experience was either happening as he wrote these words or just prior to writing these words.

Further development of his change in spiritual attitude comes in Psalm 69. He comments on the phrase in verse 16, "For thy mercy is kind." Luther shows his sensitivity to sin by classifying sin in eight different categories. Under each category he describes sin in great detail. His purpose in this is not to show how horrible sin is. He wanted to show how abundant God's mercy is in covering so many sins. All through the commentary on this Psalm Luther reflects on how desperately necessary it is for believers to grieve over their sins. They should do this to the point of experiencing hell itself. Then they are truly in a position to appreciate God's mercy. This is the first time Luther states that shame over sin is something beneficial. He must have believed as he wrote these words that God shows mercy to miserable sinners. Luther had been experiencing sin's misery for years before he wrote this commentary. His commentary on both Psalm 51 and 69 reveal that the misery is coming to a joyful end.

Finally, we arrive at Psalm 71 to see how it effected Luther's tower experience. Before we dig into the various verses on which Luther commented a few words of introduction are necessary. In the opening of the Psalm there is no reference to any author. Some commentators believe David wrote it. Others believe Jeremiah wrote it. David seems the most probable author. This is because of the close connection between Psalms 70 and 71. David is recorded as the author of Psalm 70. Another reason is that Psalm 71 combines the thoughts of other Davidic Psalms. The author uses Psalm 31 in the beginning. Psalm 70 is referred to in the middle of the Psalm. David closes the Psalm with references to Psalm 35. References in this Psalm to a lifetime of troubles and blessings, plus references to old age imply that David was elderly when he wrote Psalm 71. This review of God's righteous mercy over a lifetime was very appropriate for Luther to meditate on as the Light of the Gospel dawned in his heart.

Psalm 71 begins with words taken almost exactly from Psalm 31:2. It reads:

בְּיְהוָה הִסִּיתִי אֶל־אֲבוֹשָׁה לְעוֹלָם It is translated, "In You, O Lord, I trust. Do not let me be ashamed forever." הִסִּיתִי is a Qal perfect again revealing as in Psalm 31:2 permanent trust. אֲבוֹשָׁה is also the same as Psalm 31:2, a Qal imperfect used as a prohibition. Luther comments concerning this verse, "First, out who has not lost hope in mammon and all the world and himself cannot 'hope' in God. Neither will he 'not be

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, page 237.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, page 237.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pages 239-240.

confounded forever."<sup>12</sup> In other words, only by putting hope in God will a person avoid being confounded or as the Hebrew states more literally "be ashamed." Luther's sins had confounded him up until his tower experience. Now he was putting his hope in God. Therefore, he wasn't confounded like he had been before.

Verse 2 and Luther's comments on it reveal that the tower experience was complete. It reads: **בְּצַדִּיקְתָּךְ תִּצִילֵנִי וּתְפִלֵּנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֱלֹהֵי אֲזַנְךָ וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנִי** It is translated: "In Your righteousness deliver me and rescue me. Incline to me Your ear, and save me." A difference between Psalm 31 and Psalm 71 is that David adds another word for deliverance plus substituting the word **יָשַׁע** for **פָּלַח**. Psalm 71 uses **תִּצִילֵנִי** a Hiphil imperfect from **נָצַל**. The basic meaning of **נָצַל** is to draw out or pull out. The Hiphil form would intensify the action and imply a sudden snatching away from danger. The basic sense of **פָּלַח** is to be so smooth that one is able to slip free. The Piel would have the sense of making one slippery enough to cause his escape. The imperfect forms of both verbs mean an act of constant rescue and deliverance. **הִטָּה** is a Hiphil imperative from **נָטָה**. The basic meaning is "stretch out or extend." In the Hiphil it means incline. **הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי** is also a Hiphil imperative from **יָשַׁע**. Its basic meaning is "to be spacious." In the Hiphil it means "to liberate or save." Luther has this to say concerning the phrase, In Your righteousness deliver and rescue me, "whoever does not hope in God who justifies the ungodly cannot be delivered in God's righteousness or be rescued."<sup>13</sup> For the first time Luther correctly confesses faith in forensic justification. Beginning with Psalm 51 and going into Psalm 71 the true picture of God's declaration of the ungodly to be righteous must have dawned on him. This new faith explains why Luther was so delighted to write concerning Psalm 69:16 that those who are deeply ashamed of their sins are most blessed for they enjoy God's mercy. Whether Psalm 71 effected Luther's tower experience directly or Luther's tower experience directly effected his comments on verse 2 of Psalm 71 can only be conjectured. It is apparent that the tower experience had reached its climax by the time Luther wrote the comments concerning this verse. His own record of that event is worthy of our attention.

In his preface to his Latin works Luther wrote concerning the struggle he endured as he interpreted the Psalms to understand what God's righteousness really implied. He fought within himself to be free from the picture of God's righteousness as a judicial act of an angry judge. All during this time Romans 1:17 dominated his mind. Finally the breakthrough occurred. He writes:

At last, by the mercy of Cnd, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the works, namely, in it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, He who through faith is righteous shall live. There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.<sup>14</sup>

Luther makes these remarks in the content of his work on the Psalms just before he appeared before Emperor Charles V in Worms in 1521. Either these remarks are a flashback to 1513 or Luther became confused when he was writing this preface. Statements he makes in the Table Talks add further light to his tower experience. In 1532 Cordatus recorded this coming from Luther's recollections:

The words 'righteous' and 'righteousness of God' struck my conscience like lightning. When I heard them I was exceedingly terrified. If God is righteous (I thought), he must punish. But when by God's grace I pondered, in the tower and heated room of this building, over the words, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live' and 'the righteousness of God' I soon came to the conclusion that if we, as righteous men, ought to live from faith and if the righteousness of God should contribute to the salvation of all who believe, then salvation won't be our merit but God's mercy. My spirit was thereby cheered. For it's by the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, page 395.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, page 395.

<sup>14</sup> *Luther's Works* vol. 34, Concordia, St. Louis, page 337.

righteousness of God that we're justified and saved through Christ.<sup>15</sup>

In a later table talk of 1538 recorded by Lauterbach he states:

That expression 'righteousness of God' was like a thunderbolt in my heart. When under the papacy I read, 'In thy righteousness deliver me' (Ps. 31:1) and 'in thy truth,' I thought at once that this righteousness was an avenging anger, namely, the wrath of God. I hated Paul with all my heart when I read that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel. Only afterward, when I saw the words that follow, namely, that it's written that the righteous shall live through faith and in addition consulted Augustine, was I cheered. When I learned that the righteousness of God is his mercy, and that he makes us righteous through it, a remedy was offered to me in my affliction.<sup>16</sup>

This last account clearly puts the tower experience in 1513. His remarks on Psalm 69 concerning God's mercy reveal that God had blessed Luther with a Biblical understanding of what God does in His mercy for sinners. He declares them righteous for the sake of Jesus' perfect life and innocent death. The statement Luther makes concerning Psalm 71:2 shows that at that moment Luther believed in forensic righteousness that God, "declares the ungodly godly." The tower experience was not a sudden flash out of the blue. It began with Luther's consternation over God's righteousness in Psalm 31:1. It started in full force with Psalm 51. It reached a climax as again Luther faced the phrase, "deliver me in thy righteousness" in Psalm 71:2.

Luther finishes his comments on verse 2 by writing considerably about the differences between the two words for deliverance. He considers the first to refer to the deliverance of the soul and the second to refer to the deliverance of the body. Etymologically there is no support for his view. He was merely deriving allegorical application from the words. At this time Luther knew very little Hebrew. The Hebrew he quotes is from Reuchlin. He closes discussion of this verse by stating that no one asks God to save them unless they consider themselves weak. Luther had experienced that weakness when he was so desperately frustrated by his sins. But as he wrote the comments on verse 2 he knew the joy of having God save him.

Verse 3 reads: הָיְהִי לִי לְצוּר מְעוֹן לְבוֹא תָמִיד צְוִיתָ לְהוֹשִׁיעַנִי בִּיְסֻלְעִי וּמְצוּדָתִי אֶתָּה. It is translated: "Be for me a rock of dwelling to come (to) continually. You command to save me for my rock and my fortress (are) you." הָיְהִי is a Qal imperative. לְבוֹא is a Qal infinitive absolute plus ל. צְוִיתָ is a Piel perfect from צוה. Its basic meaning is "to set up." In the Piel it means "to command." הוֹשִׁיעַנִי is a Hiphil infinitive absolute from שׁע. With this verse Luther pictures the saved, justified believer going into battle. In that battle God is his Protector. Luther makes much of God's name being in the first phrase. However, in the Hebrew God's name is not mentioned. But Luther is right in maintaining that the Psalmist was looking for God's protection. A Christian's only alternative when encountering spiritual enmity is to, "forsake all and turn to God alone."<sup>17</sup> Next Luther expands on the phrase, "a fortified place." He calls this a place where what a Christian hopes for might be defended so that it may not be, "lost or driven out by temptation."<sup>18</sup> What a change of heart Luther experienced. Instead of hating God and living in terror of Him, Luther thinks of God as a Protector from danger. Luther ends his comments on this verse by applying the phrase, "for Thou art a firm place and my refuge," to God's unchanging, immoveable supply of all we need.

Verse 4 reads: אֱלֹהֵי פִלְטָנִי מִיַּד רָשָׁע מִכַּף מְצוּלָה לְחֹמֶץ. It is translated: "My God deliver me from the hand of evil, from the hand of those doing wrong and those who act violently." פִלְטָנִי is a Piel imperative. מְצוּלָה is a Piel participle from עול. Its basic meaning is "to turn away, to desert." The Piel meaning is "to act wickedly." חֹמֶץ is a Qal participle. Its basic meaning is "to be sharp." In this context it is applied figuratively to the mind and means, "to act violently." Luther applies this passage to three different sins of those from whom God's people need protection. They are the Jews, "who are sinners like all the descendants of Adam."<sup>19</sup> Next are

<sup>15</sup> *Luther's Works*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, page 193.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pages 308-309.

<sup>17</sup> *LW*:34, page 396.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, page 396.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, page 397.

consistent lawbreakers who want to keep sinning instead of being made righteous. Finally there are those who think they are so righteous they don't need God's righteousness. He tries to apply Amos 1:13 to this passage. It reads, "For three crimes of Israel and for four I will not convert it." But that is obviously stretching the meaning of the Amos passage. These comments expose Luther's faith in the righteousness God offers to sinners. The idea of God making the unrighteous, righteous is filling his mind as he interprets Psalm 71.

Luther skips verse 5 going on to verse 6. It reads:

עַל־יָדְךָ נִסְמַכְתִּי מִבֶּטֶן מִמְצֵי אִמִּי אֶתְּךָ גִּוְנִי בְּךָ תִּהְלֶתִי תָמִיד . It is translated: "By you I have been supported from the womb. From the inner parts of my mother You cut me out. In You is my praise continually." נִסְמַכְתִּי is a Niphal perfect from סָמַךְ. Its basic meaning is to "place or lay something so that it might rest," therefore it has the idea of offering support. The Niphal meaning is, "be supported." גִּוְנִי a Qal participle retains the completed action of the previous verb. This verse gives Luther the opportunity to display Medieval exegesis at its worst. Somehow he draws in Jesus' birth from Mary. Then he extends his interpretation to include the idea that divine truth and the church arise out of the belly of Scripture. The rest is a confused rambling in which Luther calls the Gospel a womb which heretics attempt to ravish. They can't because the Gospel is "an undefilable virgin repelling all adulterers."<sup>20</sup> Next he alludes to the time when Reuben defiled his father's concubine. How this applies to verse 6 only Luther knows.

From there Luther skips to verse 14. It reads: וְאֲנִי תָמִיד אֶיְחַלְּ וְהוֹסַפְתִּי עַל־כָּל־תְּהִלָּתְךָ . It is translated "But I continually am hoping. And I will increase concerning all Your praises." אֶיְחַלְּ is a Piel imperfect. Its basic meaning is "to remain or delay." The Piel meaning is to "expect, wait, hope." הוֹסַפְתִּי is a Hiphil imperfect from הָסַף. Luther considers both phrases to speak the same truth. That is, even when times are bad Christians will put their hope in God. They will be able to praise Him. That makes Christians different from unbelievers who have words of praise only when days are good. Luther had seen many bad days. During those bad days he had found no reason to praise God because his sins were such a burden. But now that God had blessed him with saving faith, Luther saw that he would be able to praise God even in the worst of times.

Luther continues with verse 15: פִּי יִסְפֹר צְדָקָתְךָ כָּל־הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁוֹעָתְךָ כִּי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי סְפָרוֹת . The translation is: "My mouth keeps recounting Your righteousness and Your deliverance all the day, for I do not know (their) number." יִסְפֹר is a Piel imperfect from סָפַר. Its basic meaning is "scratch, scrape or polish." In the Piel it means "number or recount." יָדַעְתִּי is a Qal perfect from יָדַע. Its basic meaning is "to see." Most commonly it is used with seeing of the mind therefore meaning, "to understand." Luther continues his thought from the previous verse. His paraphrase of verse 15 calls attention to the fact that those who are struck down and considered unjust by others know how to truly praise God. Those who praise only what is good and pleasant fail to praise God when they experience bad times. In the last phrase of this verse Luther draws a wide application. He compares those who try to become righteous before God through keeping the Law to those who put their confidence in Jesus for righteousness. A key remark is, "...I will approach inwardly to spiritual righteousness which is the strength of Christ which cannot be written in letters like the law of Moses."<sup>21</sup> He goes on to explain how the phrase, "Thou hast taught me, O God," in verse 17 explains what is said in verse 15 by applying both statements to the Jews. Again we see Luther's mind dwelling on the fact that God makes righteous only those who have come face to face with their own unrighteousness. Luther is obsessed by the Gospel message that God has declared all sinners innocent and righteous.

Luther's further comments on verse 15 deserve little comment. He tries to work in a false reading of this Psalm that Augustine uses. The correct reading of the Hebrew is, "I have not known learning." The erroneous reading is, "I had not known business dealings." The translator of this work of Luther adds this footnote, "how these harmonize is hard to say."<sup>22</sup> I agree wholeheartedly. What follows takes more imagination than can be believed. Augustine and Luther combine to compare this Psalm to the difference between writing done with a

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, page 398.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, page 399.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, page 399, note 6.

hollow pen and speaking with the tongue. Luther claims that the Law is meant by the hollow pen and the Gospel is meant by the tongue. The more he writes the more he gets himself into trouble. He finally has to admit that some of the Gospel was written with the pen and some of the law was spoken by the mouth. The point he is really trying to make is that sinful human beings can corrupt both Law and Gospel. But what that has to do with verse 15 is beyond explanation. In his rambles he makes one excellent statement. He denounces, "one's own righteousness as trouble and not peace, because it does not conciliate God but rather irritates Him and stirs up trouble against Him and against them."<sup>23</sup> Here Luther is speaking from his own personal experience. He had tried to please God with his own righteousness. That endeavor had only brought him increasing trouble. Though Luther's allegorizing of this verse leaves much to be desired concerning sound Biblical exegesis he clearly is distinguishing Law from Gospel which shows that, by God's grace, he had come far in his spiritual development.

The last verse Luther treats in this Psalm is verse 19. It reads:

וַיִּצְדַּקְתָּךְ אֱלֹהִים עַד-מְרוֹם אֲשֶׁר-עָשִׂיתָ גְדֻלוֹת אֱלֹהִים מִי כָמוֹךָ. It is translated: "Your righteousness, O God, is upon the heights which You made great. O God, who is like you?" עָשִׂיתָ is a Qal perfect from עָשָׂה meaning "to make." Luther closes his commentary on Psalm 71 on a triumphant note. He interprets this verse to be a comparison between God's righteousness and man's righteousness. Man's righteousness, "reaches down to the lowest."<sup>24</sup> This is so because those who seek or are contented with their own righteousness will eventually be humbled. But those who humble themselves will be exalted. Luther claims this verse refers directly to Christ. I cannot agree with him. But then Luther believed every Old Testament verse directly referred to Christ. Though he has to stretch the point to make his interpretation, his line of reasoning cannot be faulted. Concerning being humbled in order to be exalted Luther states, "Here he now properly refers to Christ, who is the power of God and the righteousness of God through the greatest and deepest humility. Therefore He is now the highest through supreme glory."<sup>25</sup> For Luther Jesus Christ is no longer the terrifying judge sitting on the rainbow throne. Luther no longer trembled before Him. By God's grace Christ became Luther's Mediator of righteousness and power. Luther, himself, had sunk to the depths of despair, but now by God's grace he enjoyed the bliss of being declared righteous by faith in Jesus, his Savior. The closing paragraph of this commentary summarizes Luther's spiritual situation at that moment:

Therefore, whoever wants to relish the apostle and other Scriptures must understand everything tropologically: Truth, wisdom, strength, salvation righteousness, namely, that by which He makes us strong, safe, righteous, wise, etc. So it is with the words of God and the ways of God. All of them are Christ literally, and all of them are faith in Him morally.<sup>26</sup>

Thus we see how God rescued Luther from the depths of despair concerning his sins. All was accomplished by the Holy Ghost working through the Gospel.

Luther's dilemma was similar to the dilemma faced by every individual of his era. The concern was how to make himself right with God. God solved the dilemma for Luther by revealing to him that God for Jesus' sake has declared all sinners right in His sight. A different dilemma faces modern human beings. Few ask themselves how they can become right with God, anymore. Almost everyone asks how they can make everything right for themselves. Modern people do not take their sins seriously like the Medieval people did. God is out of the picture. Man has exalted himself to the position of deity. The cause of all this of course is materialistic, humanistic evolution. But before we start on a rampage condemning all those who proclaim evolution with all its moral implications we better remove the beam from our own eyes. We are full-time servants of God's Word. We should experience constant spiritual growth. But can any of us say that we take our sins as seriously as Luther considered his? We become so caught up in busy activity that little time is spent on our own personal spiritual growth. St. Paul expressed a fear we all should share when he wrote to the

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, page 400.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, page 401.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, page 402.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, page 402.



Corinthians, "No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." (9:27) As leaders in God's church we can become so caught up with the sins and problems of others that we might fail to notice increasing worldliness and carelessness slipping into our own lives. Our first struggle is not with the sins of others but with our own sins. We can learn from Luther how blessed it is to grieve and lament our sins, actually experiencing shame and guilt. Then like Luther we will enjoy the comfort and joy that comes from believing that for Jesus' sake all our sins are forgiven. We can thank God for coming to Dr. Martin Luther through His holy Word to lift him from the darkness of despair concerning his sins to the light of salvation for Jesus' sake. Pray that God would reveal the darkness of sin in our own lives so that we will keep rejoicing that Jesus has paid for every transgression ever committed.

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