

# Luther's Theology of the Cross and a Ministry of Weakness

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## Introduction

For the German Reformer Martin Luther, true Christian theology was not a “theology of glory” (*theologia gloriae*) but a “theology of the cross” (*theologia crucis*).

- **The Theology of the Cross: Objectively**
  
- **The Theology of the Cross: Experientially**
  
- In the **Heidelberg Disputation of 1518**, Luther sought to draw that now-famous distinction between:
  - ❑ The “**theologian of glory**,” who takes his or her standards of success from the world.
  - ❑ The “**theologian of the cross**,” who knows God as he is revealed in the cross of Christ, and that the cross casts its shadow over the whole of Christian life and ministry.

## The Heidelberg Disputation (April 1518)

- **1517** (October 31): The Ninety-Five Theses.
  
- **1518** (April): **The Heidelberg Disputation.**
  
- **1519** (June-July): The Leipzig Debate.

# The Two Theologians

## ▪ The Two Theologians

- The Theologian of Glory
  
- The Theologian of the Cross

## ▪ Two Initial Observations

- (1) Luther does not speak of an abstract “theology of the cross.” Instead Luther speaks (literally in the Latin) of a “**theologian of the cross**” (*theologus crucis*) and a “**theologian of glory**” (*theologus gloriae*).
  
- (2) The “**theologian of glory**” sees things differently from the theologian of the cross and therefore he speaks differently:

- **Heidelberg Thesis 21 (The Thesis)**

The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil.<sup>1</sup>

- **Heidelberg Thesis 21 (The Proof)**

This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls “enemies of the cross of Christ” [Phil 3:18], for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works. Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good. God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said. Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross works are dethroned and the Old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified. It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God’s.

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, in Luther’s Works, 31:40. Latin: *Theologus gloriae dicit malum bonum et bonum malum. Theologus crucis dicit id quod res est.*

## (1) The Theologian of Glory

What we have to say about suffering reveals the type of theologian we are: **“The theologian of glory calls suffering evil and works good”**  
(Thesis 21 [Paraphrased])

- **(1)** The theology of glory reflects that innate human tendency to devalue and dismiss what the world regards as weak, foolish, and humble—yet it is precisely through these things that God has chosen to work.
- **(2)** The theologian of glory values those qualities that the world regards as strong, wise, confident, and successful—and yet it is precisely these things that the self-revelation of God at Calvary powerfully critiques.

The **theologian of glory** suggests that God ought to reveal himself in such situations as the world accepts and recognises as great and glorious, impressive and majestic, powerful and successful—*whereas God has in fact chosen to reveal himself in a situation of tragedy, grief, pain, suffering, despair, weakness, and death.*

## (2) The Theologian of the Cross

He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. (Thesis 20)

- **Consider:** The scene of helplessness and hopelessness on that first Good Friday, as Jesus Christ hung bruised and bleeding, suffering and dying on a Roman cross of execution:

The disciples deserted him. The crowds rejected him. The religious leaders triumphed over him. The passers-by mocked him. The soldiers tortured and crucified him. All there was to see was humiliation and shame, weakness and suffering, death and despair. Weakness and powerlessness, failure and folly was writ large over the whole scene.

The crowd which gathered round the cross were expecting to see something dramatic and dynamic to happen. If Jesus really was the Son of God, they could expect God to intervene and rescue him in a spectacular and powerful and impressive way. Yet, as that long day wore on, there was no sign of a dramatic divine intervention.

In his cry from the cross, even Jesus himself experienced a momentary yet profound sense of the absence of God, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** (Matt 27:46).

Many expected God to intervene dramatically and powerfully in that situation, to gloriously and triumphantly deliver the suffering and dying Jesus. But nothing of the kind happened. Jesus suffered, bled, and finally died.

There was no visible sign that God was present and active in that situation. All there was to see was shame and pain, suffering and weakness—culminating finally in agonising death—nothing in the least impressive by worldly standards there. So those who based their thinking about God solely on experience drew the obvious conclusion: *God was not there.*<sup>2</sup>

- **However:** The resurrection proved how unreliable human reason, judgement, and experience really is. Alister McGrath:

The resurrection overturned that judgement. God was revealed as having been present and active at Calvary, working out the salvation of humanity and the vindication of Jesus Christ. He was not *perceived* to be present—but he *really* was present. What *experience* interpreted as the absence of God, the *resurrection* showed up as the *hidden presence* of God. God may have been experienced as inactive and absent, yet the resurrection showed God to have been behind the scenes, working in secret.<sup>3</sup>

- **Note:** Instead of relying upon the misleading judgment of human reason and the deceptive impressions of human experience, we should trust in God's promises.

- ❑ **Faith** sees beyond the misleading impressions of experience and behind the misleading appearance of circumstances to the unfailing promises of God.
- ❑ **Faith** latches on to the promise of God's presence even if external appearances suggest the absence of God. Alister McGrath:

God *promises* to be present with us, even in life's darkest hours—*especially* in life's darkest hours and if experience cannot detect him as being present, then that verdict of experience must be considered unreliable and should not be trusted."<sup>4</sup>

- ❑ **Faith** in the promise of God's abiding presence sweetens our bitter afflictions, strengthens our weak and faltering faith under trial, and provides us with unexplainable peace, comfort, and contentment in a times of great suffering and sorrow, helplessness and hopelessness.
- ❑ **The fundamental question raised by Good Friday is this:** "Is God really there in the darkest moments of human experience?" The resurrection is proof of the real and redeeming presence of God in situations from which he appears to be absent. The darker moments of life, culminating in pain, suffering, despair, the knowledge of dying and death, are not areas of life from which God has been excluded, *but areas in which he has deliberately included himself.*

<sup>2</sup> Alister McGrath, *Roots that Refresh*, 74.

<sup>3</sup> Alister McGrath, *Roots that Refresh*, 74-75.

<sup>4</sup> Alister McGrath, *Roots that Refresh*, 74.

- ❑ In the midst of the humiliation and suffering of the cross, the glory of God's grace and love and faithfulness was being worked out in a way that drastically changed things forever:
  - What looked like humiliation was actually a demonstration of glory.
  - What looked like weakness was strength.
  - What looked like defeat was the only real, lasting victory.
  - And what looked like death was really the source of new and everlasting life.
  
- ❑ **Thesis 21:**

**This is clear:** He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general good to evil.
  
- ❑ The cross provides us with a radically different approach to looking at God, life, ministry, and the world. It demands that you stop looking elsewhere and that you see here—in **the cross**—the way God has chosen to make himself know to us.



## Conclusion

As Martin Luther has pointed out: It is only the resurrection that makes sense of the cross. It is only Easter Sunday that makes sense of Good Friday. This is so beautifully captured in a Good Friday sermon by Shadrach Meshach Lockridge (1913-2000), the African-American pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in San Diego, California:

It's Friday  
Jesus is praying  
Peter's a sleeping  
Judas is betraying  
But Sunday's comin'

It's Friday  
Pilate's struggling  
The council is conspiring  
The crowd is vilifying  
They don't even know  
That Sunday's comin'

It's Friday  
The disciples are running  
Like sheep without a shepherd  
Mary's crying  
Peter is denying  
But they don't know  
That Sunday's a comin'

It's Friday  
The Romans beat my Jesus  
They robe him in scarlet  
They crown him with thorns  
But they don't know  
That Sunday's comin'

It's Friday  
See Jesus walking to Calvary  
His blood dripping  
His body stumbling  
And his spirit's burdened  
But you see, it's only Friday  
Sunday's comin'

It's Friday  
The world's winning  
People are sinning  
And evil's grinning  
It's Friday  
The soldiers nail my Savior's  
hands  
To the cross  
They nail my Savior's feet  
To the cross  
And then they raise him up  
Next to criminals

It's Friday  
But let me tell you something  
Sunday's comin'

It's Friday  
The disciples are questioning  
What has happened to their  
King  
And the Pharisees are  
celebrating  
That their scheming  
Has been achieved  
But they don't know  
It's only Friday  
Sunday's comin'

It's Friday  
He's hanging on the cross  
Feeling forsaken by his Father  
Left alone and dying  
Can nobody save him?  
Ooooh  
It's Friday  
But Sunday's comin'

It's Friday  
The earth trembles  
The sky grows dark  
My King yields his spirit

It's Friday  
Hope is lost  
Death has won  
Sin has conquered  
and Satan's just a laughin'

It's Friday  
Jesus is buried  
A soldier stands guard  
And a rock is rolled into place  
But it's Friday  
It is only Friday  
Sunday is a comin'!