

## Meditatio

By Paul Koelpin

On a cover leaf of an old German Bible, penned in elegant script, was the following passage from Psalm 119: *“Dein Wort ist meine Fußes Leuchte und ein Licht auf meinem Wege”* [Your Word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path]. That was an especially appropriate dedicatory verse to use for a book that anticipates exploration and supplies divine guidance. According to Martin Luther, the themes of Psalm 119 served as a fitting overall guide to the study of Holy Scripture. He remarked that the psalm highlighted three essential features for the making of a theologian: *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*—prayer, meditation, spiritual affliction or trial (LW 34:285).

It seems hardly necessary to underscore that a pastor's personal devotional life will have considerable impact on his sermon-writing. God's Spirit uses the Word to enlighten and enrich perspectives. Many of the best illustrations for sermons come for other portions of Scripture, and a rich devotional life develops an active mind that reflects on connections between and among various Bible accounts. In Psalm 119, Luther pointed out, the psalmist pleads (*oratio*), “teach me, instruct me, lead me, show me.”

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What Luther seems to have meant by *meditatio* extended beyond contemplation and prayer to a more focused study of the Word. A pastor needs to develop a disciplined approach to examination of the Scripture—which includes analysis, inquiry, research, and review. In his explanation of what *meditatio* meant for the theologian, Luther wrote:

You should meditate, that is, not only in your heart, but also externally . . . reading and rereading [the Word] with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard, and spoken them once or twice, and that you then have

complete understanding. You will never be a particularly good theologian if you do that, for you will be like untimely fruit which falls to the ground before it is half ripe.

Thus you see in [Psalm 119] how David constantly boasts that he will talk, meditate, sing, hear, read, by day and night and always, about nothing except God's Word and commandments. For God will not give you his Spirit without the external Word; so take your cue from that. His command to write, preach, read, hear, sing, speak, etc., outwardly was not given in vain.

A colleague remarked recently that by *meditatio* Luther meant to emphasize “grappling” with the Word in serious, energetic study—of the language and of the content. Luther caught a progression of thought in the words of Psalm 119—from prayer to study to application in life experience (*tentatio*—carrying “the cross”).

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A pastor's sermon study is part of *meditatio*. By it he hopes to feed his flock with the Spirit's insights. He is also aware that the flock needs continual nourishment from the Word. Pastors so often wish that members would be able to experience the same joy and comfort they get from a study of the Word. They look for ways to reinforce the central lessons of their sermons. The feature essay in this issue reflects on the need to encourage a more vigorous devotional life among members—and families—of the congregation. Rev. Michael Koepke offers both inspiration and advice about ways to take the Word “from pulpits to parents.”

Luther intended *oratio, meditatio, tentatio* to apply to theologians. But pastors do not study only for themselves. Reflection on this dictum may emphasize that what is done before and after the sermon may be more important than the sermon itself.

# From Pulpits to Parents: Addressing the Need for Family Devotions

By Michael Koepke

Richard Baxter was a 17th century Puritan minister who served in the town of Kidderminster, England. During his ministry there, his congregation grew so much that the church building had to undergo several expansions. What would you guess to be the cause of this rapid growth?

If you said this happened because of Baxter's dynamic preaching, you would only be partially correct. Baxter's preaching certainly had the reputation of being clear and compelling, but that was not what made him unique. Baxter was convinced that public preaching, no matter how powerful, could not stand alone as the only method of communicating God's Word to the people. He said that it must be accompanied by private instruction as the pastor teaches the people in their homes. Without this personal instruction, sermons may seem to them nothing more than magniloquent speeches, uttered only to discharge a duty of the pastoral office rather than to offer useful instruction. In his book, *The Reformed Pastor*, Baxter explained:

They will give you leave to preach against their sins, and to talk as much as you will for godliness in the pulpit, if you will but let them alone afterwards.... For they take the pulpit to be but a stage; a place where preachers must show themselves, and play their parts; where you have liberty for an hour to say what you list; and what you say they regard not, if you show them not, by saying it personally to their faces, that you were in good earnest and did indeed mean them.

Certainly many laypeople listen attentively to sermons and strive to apply what they hear to their everyday lives. But is there not some truth to what Baxter says? If the only time people receive Scriptural admonishment and encouragement is for 15-20 minutes on a Sunday morning, might it not quickly become a distant memory—something isolated from the real world when they wake up on Monday morning—no matter how memorable the sermon was?

The pastor's encouragement for people to attend Bible class is one way to give them more exposure to the Word. But even if every member of his congregation were to attend worship and Bible class every week, should the pastor then be satisfied that the people were engaged with God's Word for 2 hours per week, slightly more than 1% of their lives? Recall Moses' instruction in Deuteronomy 6: "Impress [God's commandments] on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."

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This kind of exposure to God's Word can only happen in one way—as families read and discuss God's Word together at home. Imagine a congregation where the head of each family gathered everyone around God's Word throughout the week. Consider the spiritual impact that such a congregation could exert on each other and on their community as the Holy Spirit worked on their hearts throughout the week, reinforcing the Word their pastor preached to them.

It is probably unrealistic to assume that a pastor could instill a regular devotional routine in every family in his congregation. But that should not stop him from trying to increase the percentage of Bible-reading families in his congregation beyond the current norm of less than five percent. Certainly he must address this issue specifically in his sermons with law and gospel, convicting his congregation of spiritual apathy in the home and comforting them with the message of forgiveness and victory in Christ. He must motivate with the gospel: the God who rules the universe not only sent his Son to die for us—his enemies by nature—but also cares about each individual so deeply that he wants to listen to us every day through prayer and talk to us every day through his Word, just so that he can shower us with his blessings!

But the pastor must do more than simply say, "So go home and start reading your Bibles with your families!" That may be as overwhelming as an overweight patient who has grown accustomed to a sedentary lifestyle hearing his doctor say, "Go home and exercise more!" Many obstacles stand in the way of

parents who would seek to establish a family altar. The pastor must specifically address these obstacles and help his people overcome them.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle is a perceived lack of time. It may seem impossible to add one more activity to a schedule that is already bursting at the seams. If this is the case, parents must think not in terms of adding, but of subtracting. To what must you say “No!” in order to have 10 minutes to focus on the one thing needful with your family? (The average American watches 2.7 hours of TV per day.) Even if schedules are too busy to allow every family member to be present, a devotion is still a blessing when most can attend. Perhaps as the family devotion becomes a regular fixture in the home, schedules can be rearranged accordingly.

Another obstacle may be the false notion that the church or school is able to handle the entire spiritual education of children apart from their parents. Perhaps the pastor could present a sermon series on the families of Scripture (cf. suggestions below)<sup>1</sup> which could explore both the blessings that resulted when parents faithfully carried out their responsibility and the consequences that followed when they did not. Studies regarding religious transmission from parents to children also indicate that parents who engage in religious training and discussion at home are more likely to pass their faith on to their children than parents who do not. As I reviewed these studies, I found these five factors to be most important for faith transmission from parents to children: a healthy parent-child relationship, the perception that religion is important to parents (especially fathers) *even outside of church*, agreement between father and mother on religion, the children’s accurate knowledge of their parents’ beliefs, and parental interest and involvement in their child’s religious development, which includes religious discussions. It is hard to imagine how these objectives could better be met than through family devotions.

One final obstacle that should be addressed is parental feelings of incompetence. Such parents must be reminded that God *has* equipped them through faith to carry out their spiritual responsibility (otherwise he would not have given them children!), but also does not expect them to be theologians. The pastor must help these parents by pointing them to specific materials

they could use that are suited to their family situation, such as devotional books or Bibles fit for devotional use (the *NIV Today’s Light Bible* is a great tool). Perhaps the pastor could offer a weekly devotional series based on the lectionary to establish a connection between what the family hears in church on Sunday and what they meditate on throughout the week. He could provide short meditations, questions for discussion, and/or prayers for each lesson, making use of both the CW and CWS lectionaries.

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“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” So goes the old Chinese proverb. This is the principle by which Richard Baxter ran his ministry. Beyond simply giving his people spiritual nourishment, he taught them how to obtain this nourishment themselves. Should not today’s pastor aspire to do the same?

*Michael Koepke, a 2012 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, is an Admissions Counselor at Martin Luther College. This essay is drawn from his senior thesis: “Christ at Home: Addressing the Need for Family Devotions,” available at <http://www.wls.wels.net/library/senior-thesis>.*



<sup>1</sup> Genesis 8:13-22 (Noah); Genesis 12:1-9 and 18:18-19 (Abraham); Genesis 19:1-5, 12-14, 23-26 (Lot); Exodus 12:1-11 (Passover); Joshua 24:14-15 (“we will serve the LORD”); Judges 2:7-15 (Baal worship); 1 Samuel 3:1-14 (Eli and Samuel); 1 Kings 11:1-13 (Solomon); Acts 10:1-5, 23b-48 (Cornelius and Peter); 2 Timothy 1:1-5 (Lois, Eunice and Timothy).

## Preaching Christ-Centered Sanctification

Among other sessions of interest to pastors at this summer’s national worship conference is this topic presented by Prof. Richard Gurgel. “No one ever insisted that Lutheran preaching’s hallmark is insightful sanctification preaching. Without apology, our main focus is the declaration “righteous” Jesus procured for us by living perfectly and dying innocently in our place. Yet that does not make Lutherans pitiful paupers begging a few crumbs from others more well-to-do theologically in sanctification. Within our doctrinal heritage we possess a wealth just waiting to enrich encouragements to sanctified living. This workshop will explore specific aspects of that wealth that can enrich our Christ-Centered sanctification preaching.” See [www.wels.net/2014worshipconference](http://www.wels.net/2014worshipconference).



# God's Treasure . . . From a Clay Jar

The most well-known prophecy from Zechariah is the Old Testament lesson for Palm Sunday (Series A)—the prophecy of the king riding a donkey. But there is so much more preachable material in Zechariah's prophecy. It is filled with Holy Week references. An entire volume of *Luther's Works* is devoted to Luther's commentary on Zechariah (LW 20). Instead of offering a single sermon excerpt this issue, I thought it might be beneficial to consider the wealth of material Zechariah's prophecy offers to the Lenten-Holy Week preacher. Incidentally, Zechariah is also rich with "mission texts" – cf. 2:10-11, 8:22-23, and 9:9-10. My encouragement: preach Zechariah!

## Series Theme: The LORD Has Remembered His Word

*[the series theme intends to focus both on fulfilled prophecy and Zechariah's name, which has "remember" at its root]*

**Zechariah 3:1-10:** The image in this chapter presents an exceptional picture—of cleansing and renewal, of the priestly office, of the removal of sin "in a single day." The angel of the LORD says to the high priest: "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you." Note both the agency and symbolic sense of being "robed in righteousness." Although there is no explicit New Testament reference that links this prophecy to Good Friday, the "single day" can be seen as a reference to Good Friday's "finished" sacrifice.

**Zechariah 6:12-13:** "Here is the man whose name is the Branch." The phrase rings out again in Pilate's declaration to the Jewish crowd: "Here is the man!" (Jn. 19:5). The Messianic title "Branch" (also in Isaiah and Jeremiah) roots Jesus in the prophecies about Davidic ancestry. Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, it is as you say," he replied. The Messianic king would also be "a priest on his throne." The "majesty" of these two images is hidden in the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus.

**Zechariah 9:9-10:** The image of the king is here again in this great Palm Sunday prophecy (quoted in Matthew 21 and John 12). Zechariah was clear: the procession would not be glorious. But Jesus, the king, would enter Jerusalem to conquer greater enemies than any earthly army could defeat. Consider the characteristics of this king—he is "righteous and having salvation" (NIV 2011 "righteous and victorious"—more explanation is required by this translation). Palm Sunday anticipates the ultimate spiritual victory. Jesus lived successfully and blamelessly under the Law. "Hosanna to the Son of David!"

**Zechariah 11:7-13:** This prophecy is linked to the account of Judas' betrayal of Jesus (cf. Matthew 26:14-16, and 27:1-10). According to Matthew, the betrayal price and the purchase of the potter's field fulfilled prophecy from Jeremiah, though the Zechariah reference is more direct. Zechariah explores the "shepherd" image and the relationship to the "flock." The ways of God are rejected, the relationship becomes very strained, and the flock "sells out" for a pittance—thirty pieces of silver was apparently the price paid for a slave. What grace that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, endured such shame and mockery to redeem us and make us part of his flock!

**Zechariah 12:10:** In his description of the crucifixion John explains: "When they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water" (19:33-34). Such treatment departed from custom. But it occurred to fulfill prophecy (19:36-37). Grieve at the sight of the crucifixion; it is full of suffering and sorrow. But Jesus is also the focal point of grace and faith, not unlike the bronze snake in the wilderness (John 3:14-15).

**Zechariah 13:7-9:** "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." The LORD remembered these words (cf. Matthew 26:31 and 56, also Mark 14:27 and 49, 50). All of the disciples deserted Jesus at his time of greatest need. Fear, doubt, and dread prompted a flight response. But the Good Shepherd promised to preserve a remnant which would persevere in faith through trial and tribulation—which would "carry the cross" and be restored to Jesus. The text closes with a simple and direct statement of great comfort: "I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'"

**Zechariah 14:9:** The last chapter of Zechariah focuses on the coming of the king. The "Mount of Olives" reference (14:4) may refer to the scene of the ascension. In life and death, Jesus conquered sin, Satan, and hell. The resurrected LORD lives and reigns! The gospel makes it clear that Jesus defeated all opposition to his power and name. The conflicts and crosses of this world have their resolution in the power of our gracious and merciful LORD, who forgives and restores. Jesus turned the crown of thorns into a crown of righteousness. And Christ, the King, continues to govern all things for the good of his church.