

DONALD K. MCKIM



*Moments with
Martin Luther*

95 Daily Devotions



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CONTENTS



Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
Believing as a Christian	
<i>Week 1 – Knowing God</i>	2
1 The Manger in Which Christ Lies	2
2 The Book of God’s Promises	3
3 Trinity	4
4 God Creates All Things	5
5 “God Is Nothing Else than Love”	6
6 God in the Shame of the Cross	7
7 Adoring Ourselves as an Idol	8
<i>Week 2 – Knowing Ourselves and Jesus</i>	9
8 Turned In on Ourselves	9
9 The Law as Mirror	10
10 The Law as Hammer	11
11 Sin and Its Consequences	12
12 No Free Will, except to Do Evil	13
13 Son of God and Son of Mary	14
14 King Jesus	15
<i>Week 3 – Jesus Christ</i>	16
15 Jesus Humbled Himself for Me	16

16	Christ Bears Our Sins	17
17	Beautiful, Glorious Exchange	18
18	Christ Is Risen!	19
19	Christ Is Everywhere	20
20	Christ in the Lord's Supper	21
21	The Holy Spirit Brings Us to Christ	22

Week 4 – Salvation **23**

22	Grace Is God's Favor	23
23	Absolved for Christ's Sake	24
24	Justification by Faith	25
25	Righteous and Sinner at the Same Time	26
26	Good Works	27
27	One Holy Christian Church	28
28	The Communion of Saints	29

Week 5 – The Church **30**

29	God's Word and God's People	30
30	Church – Holy and Sinner	31
31	The Church Is Full of Forgiveness of Sins	32
32	The Church Will Always Exist	33
33	All Christians Are Priests	34
34	Food and Drink to Each Other	35
35	Baptism Signifies Death and Resurrection	36

Living as a Christian

Week 6 – Christian Living **38**

36	Christian Life as Daily Baptism	38
37	Faces of the Lord	39
38	Everything Is a Gift of God	40
39	Treasure beyond Temporal Goods	41
40	Lifelong Repentance	42
41	Turning from Our Evil Ways	43
42	Free and a Servant of All	44

Week 7 – Faith and Love **45**

43	The Christian's Clothing: Faith and Love	45
----	--	----

44	Eyes of Faith	46
45	Daring Confidence in God's Grace	47
46	Faith Active through Love	48
47	Upholding the Suffering and Sorrow of Others	49
48	Mighty Bones to Bear Burdens	50
49	The Supper and a Community of Love	51
	<i>Week 8 – Neighbors</i>	52
50	Living in Christ and Neighbor	52
51	To Love Your Neighbor	53
52	Be the Servant to Your Neighbor	54
53	Look for the Angels in Your Neighbor	55
54	Don't Be a Skinflint	56
55	Seize Every Opportunity to Help Our Neighbor	57
56	Do Good When Enemies Need It	58
	<i>Week 9 – Temptations and Afflictions</i>	59
57	Faith from the Heart's Core	59
58	Lead Us Not into Temptation	60
59	Run to the Lord's Prayer	61
60	Yielding to the Divine Will	62
61	Rejoice Most When Things Are Worst	63
62	Think of Christ in Suffering and Affliction	64
63	Promises in Sufferings	65
	<i>Week 10 – Forgiveness</i>	66
64	Forgiveness of Sins—The Sum of the Gospel	66
65	Forgive One Another in Every Situation	67
66	Continual Forgiveness	68
67	Inward and Outward Forgiveness	69
68	Forgiveness Does Not Depend on My Contrition	70
69	Promise of Forgiveness If We Have Faith	71
70	Christ's to One Another	72
	<i>Week 11 – Christian Attitudes</i>	73
71	Do Not Covet Honor	73
72	Vainglory	74
73	Humility as Greatest Bond of Christian Love	75

74	Don't Notice Your Works of Mercy	76
75	In Despair We Most Hope for Mercy	77
76	Use Wealth in a Christian Manner	78
77	Freed from the Fear of Death	79

Week 12 – Worship and Serving God **80**

78	The Worship of God	80
79	Give God Praise	81
80	Do What Is Just	82
81	Everyone Must Serve Every Other	83
82	Do Everything in the Name of God	84
83	Good Works for a Gracious and Loving God	85
84	The Church as Inn and Infirmary	86

Week 13 – Prayer and Trust **87**

85	Be Constant in Prayer	87
86	Pray and Cry to God	88
87	God Will Say Yes	89
88	Christ Protects Us	90
89	Don't Forget God When Things Run Smoothly	91
90	God Is Hidden among the Sufferings	92
91	Entrusting Our Life to God	93

Present and Future

92	A Blessing Mouth	96
93	I Have Been Baptized	97
94	We Are Beggars	98
95	In the Bosom of Christ	99

Permissions	101
--------------------	------------

Notes	103
--------------	------------

Selected Resources for Further Reflection	105
--	------------

PREFACE



I am pleased to offer this Luther devotional book as a complement to my *Coffee with Calvin: Daily Devotions*.

Martin Luther (1483–1546) is a major character in the Western world. His influence since the sixteenth century has been far-ranging, especially in Europe and North America. Luther has been a fascinating figure, not only for his theological insights but also for the ways his thought has been used in relation to political, social, and cultural views and practices. But it is as a theologian, who had a key role in beginning what became known as the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, that his work has been most enduring. So it is a special pleasure to present these moments with Luther during 2017, the five hundredth anniversary year of Luther's Ninety-five Theses, when Luther is remembered and focused on throughout the world.

This is a book of devotional meditations based on short selections of Luther's writings. Nearly all the quotations are drawn from the American edition of *Luther's Works* (volumes 1–30: edited by Jaroslav Pelikan [St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76]; volumes 31–55: edited by Helmut Lehmann [Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86]; volumes 56–82: edited by Christopher Boyd Brown [St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–]; cited hereafter as *LW*), the most easily accessible resource for a vast extent of Luther's writings. New volumes continue to be translated and made available.

The selections from *LW* are the focus of each devotion. When quotes are given without a Luther reference, they are from the

selection at the top of the page. Other quotes are cited with reference to the *LW* volume and page number. There are many Luther quotes in the devotions since I've tried to let Luther speak for himself as much as possible.

My goal has been to draw insights from Luther that can be meaningful expressions of Christian faith and action for contemporary Christians. Luther's theological themes have endured for centuries and continue to nourish the faith of millions of Christians today. Christians look to Luther for theological perceptions as well as paths for Christian living. My hope is that these moments with Luther will introduce Luther's wisdom to those who seek theological understanding as well as visions for what God wants disciples of Jesus Christ to be and do by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The book does not, of course, convey the fullness of Luther's thought. This is a task for scholars who draw on Luther's voluminous writings and try to provide an overall coherence and understanding of Luther's important insights. This book cannot explore all aspects of Luther's theological beliefs or his prescriptions for Christian life, since Luther's views on Christian living emerge into many directions.

The book is divided into two major sections: "Believing as a Christian" and "Living as a Christian." This is to indicate, most broadly, that learning from Luther includes what he taught on some of the major aspects of Christian doctrine or Christian belief coupled with his concerns that Christian belief be expressed in the practical aspects of life together in the Christian community, the church, and the life of the Christian in the world.

The book is composed of ninety-five meditations—one, of course, for each of Luther's Ninety-five Theses. Its main structure is sets of seven devotions for thirteen weeks—to encourage a "daily devotion" approach. Each week has an overall theme with devotions devoted to a particular topic of Luther's work. The remaining four devotions have the title "Present and Future." The devotions can be read in any number of ways, and my hope is that they will provide spiritual nourishment whichever method is adopted.

This may be a first acquaintance with Luther for some readers. In days when it is not likely that persons will eagerly turn to major theological tomes, my hope is to provide “bite-sized” bits of Luther. I try to say what Luther means and what implications may be for twenty-first-century persons. As simply and accessibly as possible, I introduce Luther’s perceptions and provide a resource that can open some theological as well as devotional or spiritual insights.

Martin Luther was a Christian preacher and teacher. He advocated the approach of the early church theologian Augustine (354–430): that Christian existence is “faith seeking understanding.” We study and reflect on Christian faith to gain understanding—of who God is, what God has done, and what God wants us to do. The study of Luther’s work can enhance our faith and understanding, during this five hundredth anniversary year . . . and beyond.

Luther wrote, “We should thank God and be happy that our Lord God has shown us the reason for studying, namely, to please Him and to be useful to the world and to improve it. If God grants you something beyond this, then accept it and thank Him for it” (*LW* 68:153). May God grant our studies in Luther will be pleasing to God, useful to the world, and lead to our service to Jesus Christ for the good of the world and its people. Beyond this—for all benefits—we give God thanks and praise!

Donald K. McKim

Germantown, Tennessee
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Believing
as a Christian

Week One – Knowing God

1. The Manger in Which Christ Lies

Think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find that divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds [Luke 2:12]. Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them. (*LW* 35:236)



Martin Luther was a man immersed in Holy Scripture. In his various roles—as a theologian, preacher, teacher, biblical commentator, biblical translator, and all else—Luther was absorbed and deeply occupied with the study of the Bible.

Luther dealt with the Bible on a number of levels. He was concerned with the words of the biblical text as he translated the Old and New Testaments. He desired to hear what the writers of Scripture meant when they wrote. He wanted to understand the theological teachings of Scripture. And he was passionate to proclaim the message of Scripture.

In it all, Luther believed the Bible presented God’s divine wisdom, given through ordinary writers. Supremely, the Bible presents Jesus Christ. As the shepherds were pointed to the manger by the angels at Jesus’ birth, so we are pointed by the Scriptures as the “swaddling cloths” and manger that hold the treasure of God’s Son.

The Scriptures center in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. As we study and seek to understand the Bible, we keep Christ in front of us. We thank God for the Scriptures as the manger in which Christ lies.

2. The Book of God's Promises

So you see that the gospel is really not a book of laws and commandments which requires deeds of us, but a book of divine promises in which God promises, offers, and gives us all his possessions and benefits in Christ. (LW 35:120)



What is the Bible? There are many views about what the Bible is and how we should understand it. Throughout our culture, people refer to the Bible in different ways. They decide whether or not this ancient book has any importance or relevance for us today.

Some people see the Bible in a negative light. It is a book with many laws and commandments to restrict and regulate human life.

But for Luther, the Bible is not about God trying to tell people what to do in order to gain favor with God or meet God's requirements. It is not about what we can do for God. It has a bigger purpose. The Bible is about what God does for us. The Bible is a book of divine promises. It tells us what God promises to do, now and in the future. Here we find what God wants to give and share with us.

This book of God's promises tells us what God offers and gives us in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we receive a life with benefits like none other. It is a life that can come from no other source. God's promises provide the riches of God through what Jesus Christ has done for us. Christ brings God's love and salvation. In Christ, God is with us. The fullness of God's loving presence is ours in Christ. This is the most important benefit we can ever imagine!

3. Trinity

So we, too, have our being in God, move and live in Him (Acts 17:28). We have our being because of the Father, who is the “Substance” of the Godhead. We are moved by the image of the Son, who, moved by a divine and eternal motion, so to speak, is born of the Father. We live according to the Spirit, in whom the Father and the Son rest and live, as it were. But these matters are too sublime to belong here. (*LW* 27:290)



Our lives are grounded in the Holy Trinity. We owe the origins of who we are and who we can become in Jesus Christ, to the one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is a basic of Christian belief. The God revealed in Jesus Christ and made known to us by the Holy Spirit is one God. God is one; but God is three persons. These three are eternal, sharing one “substance” or essence or being. They are three distinct “persons” who are active in the world—and in our lives—as Scripture proclaims.

In interpreting Paul’s words: “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:6), Luther recognizes what the church came to believe is the work of the triune God in bringing us to become children of God.

Each of the three persons is involved in our lives of faith. The full Trinity brings salvation to us. How this occurs is a sublime mystery. The Trinity is not an abstract doctrine to baffle us. It is the reality of our lives, as created by God and as adopted into the family of God as God’s children. Praise the Holy Trinity!

4. God Creates All Things

It is God who creates, effects, and preserves all things through his almighty power and right hand, as our Creed confesses. For he dispatches no officials or angels when he creates or preserves something, but all this is the work of his divine power itself. (*LW* 37:57)



God creates and is continuously active in creation. This was basic for Luther. God brought all things into existence and continues creatively to support and preserve all God has made.

In this, Luther affirmed what the ancient creeds confess. In the familiar words of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker [creator] of heaven and earth." The origin of all things is with God. However God chose to create, it is God's power that is the source of all. In trying to capture the greatness of this power, Luther said it is "uncircumscribed and immeasurable, beyond and above all that is or may be." We can imagine nothing and no power greater than is ascribed to almighty God. There is no need for any intermediary to accomplish God's creative purposes, says Luther. It is all the work of God's divine power itself.

Two important things follow from Luther's convictions here. First, we owe our origins to God. As Luther affirmed in his Small Catechism: "I believe that God has created me together with all that exists."¹ God is our creator. Second, God's presence is real and exists everywhere in the created order. Everywhere we can be, God is with us!

5. “God Is Nothing Else than Love”

Indeed, God is nothing else than love. For even though He is also goodness, yet all His blessings flow from love. These words are of great importance, and they are believed by few, yes, by very few. For the most part we look at God with a sad and hard heart, and we regard Him as a Judge. Therefore he who is imbued with the knowledge that God is love is happy. (*LW* 30:300)



One of the simplest, yet most profound definitions of God is in 1 John 4:16: “God is love.” No description says so much in just three words!

In commenting on this verse, Luther makes comprehensive claims that “God is nothing else than love.” This means love is the basic reality of God that from which all else flows. Luther indicates that while it is true God is “also goodness,” yet, all God’s blessings “flow from love.” “God is good” is true of God. But when it comes to indicating the source of the blessings God gives to the world—and to each of us, Luther attributes these to God’s most basic characteristic: God is love.

Yet not everyone believes this. Indeed, Luther thought this is believed by “very few.” Our view of God is more likely a view that produces “a sad and hard heart.” This is when God is regarded as a Judge. Certainly Luther believed the Scriptures teach that God is a judge. Judgment is a dimension of God’s actions.

But there is more and a better view. For “God is nothing else than love.” This reverses sadness and hardness of heart. To know that God is love brings happiness. It is our deepest joy! What better news can there be?!

6. God in the Shame of the Cross

Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as Isa. [45:15] says, “Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.” (*LW* 31:52)



In theological theses prepared for the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), the young Luther laid out his emerging theology. He distinguished two approaches, between a “theology of glory” and a “theology of the cross.”

Luther characterized the dominant theology of his day as a “theology of the glory,” which sought to know of God’s invisible nature through speculating on God’s divine power and wisdom, through God’s works in creation (see Rom. 1:20–23). This could lead persons to think that they are “worthy and wise.”

But for Luther, this misses the fact that humans are sinful and now must know the true God only in relation to their sin and God’s divine judgment. They must know God through a “theology of the cross,” where God is both hidden and revealed in Jesus Christ. God is hidden in what the world considers “foolish” (1 Cor. 1:25), in Jesus’ humanity, weakness, and suffering. Luther put it starkly: “God can be found only in suffering and the cross” (*LW* 31:53).

Faith recognizes God in the shame and suffering of Christ on the cross. Theology is about salvation and not about philosophical ideas. We encounter the true God in the man Jesus, who as the Son of God, suffered as the means to the gift of salvation — unattainable through human reason, good works, or ethical actions. The “wisdom of the wise” is destroyed.

7. Adoring Ourselves as an Idol

But this is completely wrong, namely to please oneself, to enjoy oneself in one's works, and to adore oneself as an idol. He who is self-confident and without fear of God, however, acts entirely in this manner. For if he had fear he would not be self-confident, and for this reason he would not be pleased with himself, but he would be pleased with God. (*LW* 31:46)



In discussing the First Commandment (Exod. 20:3) in his Large Catechism, Luther said that “anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.” For “to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart.”²

This is human sin. To trust and depend on something other than God is to have an “idol.” The First Commandment is God’s prohibition of idols, which Luther sees in his Heidelberg Disputation as including “to enjoy oneself in one’s works, and to adore oneself as an idol.”

This is so basic—and so easy—to fall into as a way of life. No wonder idolatry is taken up in the First Commandment! Making an idol of one’s self—“self-adoration”—is there. It is the sinful inclination that lurks within us all. We rely and depend on many things: our wealth, status, power, or social position. These, we believe, will bring us the security and celebrity we crave—living in the “spotlight.” They become “gods,” idols.

But our hearts are truly to rely on God. We trust and depend and cling to God alone!