

FAITH THAT SEES THROUGH THE CULTURE

ALFONSO ESPINOSA

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS

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**“ Behold, children are
a heritage from the LORD. ”**

—Psalm 127:3

DEDICATION TO TRACI DAWN ESPINOSA

“When I look at all the women in the world, I find none of whom I could boast as I boast with joyful conscience of my own.”

—Martin Luther and to our children A. J., Elizabeth, Danielle, Christina, David James, Esbeydi, Bryan, and Katherine

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my congregation—St. Paul’s Lutheran Church of Irvine (formerly of Laguna Beach)—for granting me a seventh-year sabbatical. Without them, this work would have remained an idea. I thank them for their love and support.

I ran my proposal by my father confessor, Rev. Robert Dargatz. He was wise to remind me that when it comes to the theological dualities, we must take special care. If one goes too far to one side, we end up with heresy. We must be faithful to both ends of the theological spectrum. I’m reminded that pastors are fortunate to have their own pastors. Another pastor with whom I work on the LCMS Board for National Mission is Rev. Tim Droegemueller. He and I conducted a little word study in St. Louis and discovered how the Scriptures describe the Christian with despair and without it, depending on the context. This motivated me all the more to write a book to those Christians feeling despair, so that in faith they would also have joy and be delivered from despair.

During the sabbatical, I had some quality time in Germany visiting my daughter Danielle and our new grandson, as well as our son-in-law Simon Volkmar, who is serving as a vicar at a SELK congregation in Düsseldorf. I had the chance to bounce some ideas off my theologically minded son-in-law. He was a good listener, and I’m grateful for his help in empathizing with modern readers who are serious about their faith but are also carrying around good questions. My wife, Traci, and I traveled with our eldest daughter, Elizabeth. I ran many of the real-life anecdotes by her and she offered quality suggestions, true to her professional counselor training.

I share many stories from a ministry spanning almost three decades, and I have learned how the Holy Spirit also teaches through the parishioners I have been called to serve. They have the Word of Christ dwelling in them and they have bless-

ed me. Most of the stories within this book are about them (with some exceptions). I have changed the names and other personal details so as to protect identities. In those cases where I've retained their actual name with a few other true details, I gathered their permission to do so. Of course, many other parishioners not mentioned in the book's anecdotes have also helped me tremendously.

One of those former members I served is Mrs. Joni Breland. I mention her because she has been among those Christians who have taught me that we can know all the good theology in the world, but if we can't meaningfully communicate it to real people, what good is it? I've written this while trying to take deep truths of God's Holy Word and then present them in ways that can be grasped without a degree in theology. I hope I've come close to accomplishing this.

I have felt invigorated by how the team at Concordia Publishing House has received my proposals for this book. Paul McCain, Scot Kinnaman, and Laura Lane gave me the confidence needed to finish. The LCMS is blessed to have such an outstanding and faithful publishing house.

Finally, I thank my wife, Traci. She has helped me in countless ways to be the kind of preacher, teacher, and writer that I am. I asked her to listen to a lot of material. She always had good feedback. She is true to life and seeks the practical so that our sacred teaching doesn't fly too high above our heads. Her encouragement to me is priceless, and she reminds me that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13).



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FOREWORD

SIMPLE COMPLEXITIES

The teaching of God's Word can never be distilled down to platitudes. Instead, God's Word confronts the believer with irreducible tensions such as Law and Gospel, the two natures in Christ, the death of God's eternal Son on the cross, and so forth. Not only are these bipolarities common in the structure of the Christian faith, but they all maintain interpenetrating tensions among themselves. What I mean is that what we believe about the person of Christ is related to what we think happened to our Lord on the cross, and that that relationship between who Christ is and what He does on the cross is also intimately tied to the Church's proclamation in Law and Gospel. Without too much effort, we are tying together a number of ways of "looking at" the Christian religion and her teaching. This intense complexity of our teaching takes into account both the actual instruction of God from Holy Scripture and how that teaching from Scripture impacts the messy daily lives of Christians, actual human beings within culture. Once applied, this Word of God intersects with the Christian faith as it is lived in the lives of those who are simultaneously righteous and sinners. One can immediately see why soul care requires thoughtful and theologically trained pastors. One of those is the author of this present volume, a dear colleague, Al Espinosa. He helps us deal with this complexity simply. Both pastor and layman will be helped by this work.

Dealing with this complexity is one of the great challenges of Christianity in the modern world, partly because irony is not the strong suit of the modern intellectual context. We moderns demand that things be explained in a straightforward, uncomplicated way. Intellectual indirection today is criticized as cant, wordy dogma, or out-and-out contradiction. At best,

irony is a word game, not a hint to the interwoven and complex character of reality in the presence of a gracious God. Irony is thought to be fun and entertaining but cannot be a description of what is. When my family talks about the horror movies my older daughter likes to watch, my wife is revolted by the content, and my daughter replies, “But it’s not real.” In the same way, we tolerate ambiguities in movies only because “it isn’t real.” I love reading the great literary novels because they often subtly confront the reader with the kinds of challenges that give rise to the indirection that deep consideration of life and reality are made of. It isn’t that reality’s character is unclear—just more complex than we can make out at first glance. The same can be said about our Christian religion, especially as it makes an impact in the morally untidy world in which we live.

God is always “turning over” things on us, making a mockery of our expectations. For example, all too easily we think that the best and brightest have a right to the Kingdom; it is theirs by reason of their talent, ability, and shining good works. Nothing could be more wrong, for those who are beloved by God are loved for Christ’s sake, not because of their own attainments. And though they appear rejected by God and outcasts from the world, they are the exact opposite (Matthew 5:1–12). They are treasures of God purchased by the cleansing blood of Christ and sons of God by adoption into God’s family through the word of God’s Son.

How easily our heart gets us down, though, when confronted by our own weakness and the tribulations that we face daily. Sometimes I wonder, “What’s wrong with me?” Perhaps you have felt the same way. It points out to me that things can’t be as perfect as I want them to be or try to make them.

Here we need to retreat from our experience to the Word of God to seek comfort under what Martin Luther calls *contraria*: “the contraries.” God exercises our faith by setting before

us our own weakness and telling us that the weak are blessed. We feel no such thing in our hearts! So where are we left? Not depending on our hearts, but depending entirely upon the Word of God. He promises that those who do not have a deed will inherit the promised land, like our forefather in the faith, Abraham. He promises that those who do not bear children will be mothers of uncounted myriads, like Sarah (Galatians 4). So when we see that we have not and do not, then we should confess that we are truly blessed, purely because the Word says so. What we have is Christ. He has done everything.

All of the Christian life is then lived *sub contraria*, that is, “under the contraries.” Luther taught that God is always hiding His grace and blessings under the signs of those things that our human reason declines to believe to be capable of bearing the blessings of God. To exercise our faith, our heavenly Father plans that our strength should be made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9), that our faith is set in its substance without seeing (Hebrews 11:1), that winning is losing (Philippians 3:7–8), that only sinners are forgiven (Psalm 32:1–2), and that life is gained only by death (2 Corinthians 4:10–11). You don’t get much more contrary than that.

Our ignorance about the contraries relates to the fallen nature of humanity. We don’t see clearly because of our spiritual blindness. In that blindness, we begin to impose a shape and meaning on reality that is foreign to its complexity and contrariety. In no area of human life is this more significant than in the experience of human suffering and weakness. For example, life is not just so simple as to be described as the effort to avoid suffering or to seek the greatest pleasure, as Thomas Hobbes argued. Such simplistic interpretations of reality founder on the pervasive and indivisible complexity of things in our experience. Experiences we might call “bittersweet” are examples of the lack of simplicity in real life.

Motivational speakers say, “What does not kill you will make you stronger.” This is not the whole story for Christians. For those shaped under the cross of Christ, what does kill us does make us stronger, and that strength is hidden under weakness in the cross that God sends. At its very core, Christianity has this complexity, the complexity of the cross, returning us to the completeness with which we were created in Eden. The cross, its suffering and death both hide and confer life, peace, and joy. Our own suffering and anxiety over the human condition must never keep us from seeing that God Himself triumphs in us through such things, all hidden under the contraries. This is the “seeing through” of which this book speaks. And it’s just that simple.

Scott R. Murray, PhD
The Commemoration of the Cappadocian Fathers, 2018

PREFACE

I feel like the luckiest guy in the world to get to do what I get to do. I'm referring to the pastor-teacher ministry (Ephesians 4) and the call to share and equip people with the Word of the Lord Jesus Christ. And yet, I've always been what I see as a middle-zone guy. That is, the Lord has equipped me in His sacred teaching as a PhD in theology; an adjunct professor of theology at Concordia University, Irvine; a writer with contributions to *The Lutheran Study Bible* and *The Lutheran Difference*; and a pastor for over twenty-six years. Yet there are teachers finer than I, and at the highest levels of the Church's teaching ministry (and indeed even in the parish ministry). My position therefore is that of a servant in the middle, so my passion has been to reach God's people with the best of God's teaching in a way that is meaningful and easy to understand. I strive to be a bridge for bringing the most important teachings of God's Word to the everyday Christian who often struggles like every other Christian out there (including myself).

That general vision has been narrowed recently to a specific concern about the area of the "both-and" dualities in the Word of Christ. There are so many "two sides of the same coin" in the Word of truth. For example, we correctly confess that God works upon us so that 1) God kills us, and 2) God makes us alive. He uses His Word to do the one and He uses His Word to do the other. In doing so, however, He reveals that the Word itself is a "both-and" Word, a two-sided Word, a two-themed Word. It is duality. It is used one way in one context and another way in another context. And this is just one example of the many dualities that exist in the Christian faith.

When people are not aware of these dualities, however, then they begin to assume that either only one side is true and the other side must be false, or they give in to the skepticism of our time and culture, and they begin to suspect that

God's Word is contradictory. Often, many folks won't necessarily ever get to the point of openly criticizing the Word of God, but in their heart and mind, they begin to feel that God's Word is just beyond them—not accessible as perhaps they had hoped it would be or could be. This is a sad state of affairs. I am motivated not to stand for this. I was inspired to do something about this problem. This is the theological reason that this book exists.

The book also exists, however, for practical reasons. I was blessed that for the first time in my service as a pastor, my congregation at St. Paul's Lutheran Church of Irvine, California, chose to grant me a sabbatical. They also permitted me to put most of my vacation time alongside the one-month sabbatical so that I could be away for two solid months. Knowing that this was coming up, I reached out to the team at Concordia Publishing House and was invited to float a proposal for a book that would serve serious and mature Christians who recognize the challenges of living the faith in the twenty-first century. I thought about this for a solid month, and that was when my concern about the lack of awareness of Christian dualities came to the surface.

How can Christians live more confidently in their faith if they are at the same time constantly challenged to understand it? The dualities can be confusing. Something should be done about it, so I submitted my proposal to CPH. I was delighted by the response. They agreed to my proposal, and the Lord gave me two months to write this book. It is written by me—the middle-zone guy—attempting to write about some of the most challenging teachings of the saving faith in a way that can be easily grasped. I pray that it is a blessing to you, the reader.

INTRODUCTION

This book is entitled *Faith That Sees through the Culture*. That's a long title, but what does this mean? That's the Lutheran question. The first word, *faith*, is a created thing, and this one point by itself already represents why this book is speaking differently than much of popular Christianity in America. In today's parlance, *faith* is an exertion of will; it is a decision. Perhaps some would say it is a decision enabled by a *prevenient* grace, a kind of preliminary or empowering grace, but nonetheless the key player is the person who uses his or her volition to believe: God has done His part; now our part is faith. This is *not* the definition this book is working with.

Faith, while it eventually impacts every faculty of a person—including the will (so that faith is experienced also in the will)—is not reduced to an action of the will. It is a gift from God that God must bring into existence. This is why the old Lutheran teachers described faith as a *spiritual organ*. Just as God created one's heart and lungs, God created one's faith. As the heart pumps blood, faith pumps prayer, service, and witness. For this to happen, however, the Word of Jesus must be received. Romans 10:17 teaches that "faith comes . . . through the word of Christ." Through the Word of Christ, God creates and preserves. If this faith is to survive and grow, therefore, it must receive the Word of Christ over and over again.

This faith comes therefore with a significant presupposition: the Christian with such faith is always around the Word of Christ, and if this is the case, then such a Christian is always around His Sacraments too (since His Word prescribes His Sacraments). These gifts of Word and Sacraments sustain and nourish faith, keeping it alive. This faith is therefore also *sacramental*.

Many years ago, during my undergrad years, a classmate

in my doctrine class was frustrated by the several ways the Word of Christ comes to people. He asked my old professor, who was a particularly gifted man, “But why the redundancy? Why is it necessary that the Word come in so many varying ways?” I could feel the background skepticism: the presentation sounded like religion for the sake of religion; people had just made up additional ways to receive God’s grace. The only problem with this pessimistic suspicion is that God’s Word teaches about the various means of the Word of Christ. These are not man’s idea but God’s. Why on earth would God do this?

I’ve had a lot of time to think about my old classmate’s concern and I have come to appreciate the analogy of holy marriage. In marriage, husband and wife are called by God to love each other, but suppose a spouse tried to reduce that love to a singular expression. Imagine a husband telling his wife, “You know that I love you since I wear my wedding band.” What if the husband said this with the belief that he was therefore exempt from every other expression of love? That is, this husband believed that serving his wife, encouraging her with his words, caressing her with his touch, and giving her intimate attention was completely unnecessary. “Why do these things, when my love is already affirmed by the ring I wear?” How might the wife react? These considerations remind us that marital love is supposed to be expressed in *many* ways. This is God’s design, and God knows what He is doing. We should trust Him.

This is also true when it comes to receiving the Word of Christ. God has intentionally given many ways of receiving Jesus’ Word, because God knows how much help we need. He knows how easy it is for us to grow discouraged. He understands our great need to be strengthened in many ways and on many fronts. God knows what He is doing. We should trust Him.

In saying this we have presented a duality that this book takes for granted. God gives His Word not only to be preached (and heard and believed), but also to be encountered physically, on our bodies in Holy Baptism, and into our bodies in Holy Communion. Water is to be poured out upon the Christian (and this water contains the Word); bread and wine are to be taken into the mouth (and these also give the body and blood of Jesus Christ). No one can explain how these things are possible. It is enough that God says they happen. Faith believes in what God says. Interestingly, these take hold of the person to give faith, and then, when faith is created, faith takes hold of what God's Word has already done. Talk about a complementary relationship. In this way, important questions are answered: "Shouldn't a person have faith when they are baptized?" Answer: "Yes." "But you say that Baptism is most often given to those—especially infants—without faith." Answer: "True." "Well then, I'm confused." Answer: "Baptism creates the faith required to receive it."

See the duality: Jesus comes through what is written and what is poured out; Jesus comes through what is taught and through what is eaten. God's plan is Word *and* Sacraments. Not just one, but both. Interestingly, the Christian faith has held on to this duality for two thousand years, even while many contemporary Christians have sadly given up on the Sacraments, convinced that they seem too much like religion for the sake of religion. We should never, however, give up on God's gifts just because it is possible for some to mishandle them. This book holds to the old tradition taught in God's Word. It does so because this book assumes that God's Word is powerful and effects the miraculous, not to tickle the fancy of people through the visually spectacular, but to grant them God's grace for eternal life. The Sacraments are therefore anything but religion for the sake of religion.

What this book does, however, is look at some monumentally important dualities that are especially lost on today's culture. There is not enough space to include all important dualities. There are many that this book does not elaborate upon. The duality above all others is that the Savior Jesus Christ is true God and true man. This important duality of Christ will have to be studied elsewhere. Other dualities not presented are more basic, like life and death, light and darkness, angels and demons, and the way of the wise versus the way of the fool (though what is covered here is related even to these dualities). There are many more. The good news, however, is that this book is discussing some great ones and—again—ones that need more attention in the face of the cultural challenges that Christians face today.

To speak of the ability *to see* and to *be seeing* through faith echoes what St. Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians 5:7: "For we walk by faith, not by sight." The *seeing* in our title therefore is not a physical seeing, but a *faith* seeing. Faith sees what is otherwise unseen; faith *knows* what otherwise is unknown. This is what created faith does. It is the ability to perceive the things of God that the rest of the world considers to be nonsense.

Such seeing is needed on account of where we live: in the culture. The title of the book does not assume that the culture in itself is bad. As we will explain, the culture includes many things in God's good creation (and yes, the creation continues to be good). At the same time, the culture also includes many things that are not so good. These are the things we are bringing out, not so we can sit on a high horse to condemn the culture, but to know how to respond to the culture through faith. Along the way, this book recommends that the culture should be considered something holy. This will be explained even in the face of its many contours to the contrary. In the meantime,

the culture includes everything that fills our everyday lives in our day-to-day existence and where we live. It includes what we eat, what we listen to, how we live together; how we work and how we play; and how we dress and how we communicate. Culture is pervasive. Along the way, it is for the Christian to know how to live in it.

Finally, the dualities—or lenses—are biblical, and because they are biblical, they are also *Lutheran*. As many know, the Lutheran Church in its original form called itself *evangelical*; that is, “of the evangel,” or “of the Gospel.” It is a Christian *confession* that emphasizes a Christ-centered approach to the Christian faith. That makes sense since even the word *Christian* means “Christ’s” or “belonging to Christ.” In this way, the Lutheran Christian maintains that a Christ-centered emphasis is really the only proper emphasis. Many have summarized the Lutheran approach in terms of the great *solas* of the Reformation: grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, and in Christ alone. For our lens to be *Lutheran*, it must emphasize the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ more than anything else. Just one more qualification here: over the years, many denominations (which is more of a sociological label than a theological one) have forsaken the confession that the Holy Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God. Sadly, some Lutheran traditions have also turned away from inspiration and inerrancy. This book, however, has held on to the old confession and continues the tradition that the Holy Bible is God’s true Word.

With this foundation, we go forward on this journey of *Faith That Sees through the Culture*. Chapters 1 and 2 empathize with all true Christians who know the external and internal struggles that come with life. These do not mean the Christian is not a true Christian. Much to the contrary, all Christians endure these assaults. This is the norm, not the exception. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 fortify the Christian’s true identity in the

midst of the struggles, thus providing confidence and security. The believer in Christ is *Christian* (chapter 3), *disciple* (chapter 4), and *priest* (chapter 5). With the believer's identity firmly established, the book launches into the most important lenses, or dualities, presented in this volume. Those lenses are the following: the duality of the visible and invisible (chapter 6); the duality of the old and new aspects of the Christian (chapter 7); the duality of approaching others with a Gospel that is both inclusive and exclusive (chapter 8); the duality of church and state (chapter 9); the duality of living both in the present and in the future (chapter 10); and the duality of the two ways of speaking God's Word: the duality of Law and Gospel (chapter 11). Chapter 12 is a summary of all these and how to pull them out, depending on what the culture throws at the Christian. It is time to start our journey. This is faith that sees through the culture.

CHAPTER 1

STRUGGLING
WITH
THE
OUTSIDE

Culture consists of everything that fills the lives of people in a given place, be it the clothing they wear, the food they eat, the music they listen to, or the way in which their communities are organized. These things are connected to the good work of God in creation, but also in some cases to the effects of sin in the world, which contribute to cultural formation. This reminds us that while the culture and God’s creation we live in are related, they are not the same thing. While it may be necessary therefore to discern what is bad in the culture, we should never say—just because sin has entered the creation—that God’s creation is bad. It isn’t, and who can deny its marvelous benefits?

THE GOOD CREATION

In the beginning, God beheld a “very good” creation (Genesis 1:31), and even now—in spite of sin—the creation is still just that. Look upon a gorgeous sunset or take in a splendid moonlit night. These punctuate the “very good.” We rejoice to confess, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). This is always true. Thank God.

Many of creation's "very good things" slide into the cultures formed by people. We praise God for art that inspires, celebrations of joy marked by delicious food and calming drink, and sports that make us jump up and down as we cheer. Just look at a pug tilting its head, and try not to smile; or a pouncing kitten, and try not to laugh. See a dolphin launch from ocean depths not far from the edge of your boat, or witness the aurora borealis for the first time, without letting the moment take over. Witness a healthy baby born, and try not to be in awe. In the Apostles' Creed, when we confess God as Creator, we acknowledge Him as the giver of all good gifts. We acknowledge Him in the explanation of the First Article that He is the Giver of house and home and all that comes with these. Solomon was expressing wisdom when he wrote, "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do" (Ecclesiastes 9:7). God approves of our enjoyment of the good things in His creation!

God's very good creation and the idea of the world, however, take us back to the distinction between culture and creation mentioned above. This can be a little confusing because the word *world* has more than one meaning. If *world* is used for "earth," then we are back to the realm of the very good creation; but *world* may also stand for the existence we inhabit, and that includes the evil influences in the sphere of our lives: bad things in the culture with bad spiritual influences behind them.

"THE WORLD" AS DISTINCT FROM CREATION

There is therefore a bad world within God's very good creation. The saying goes, "Christians are *in* the world, but not *of* the world." This sounds compelling (at least catchy), but is it true? The sinful world seems inescapable. Evil influences

permeate the culture, and we are very much in the culture. *World* in the sense of sinful *worldliness* is in the air we breathe. We go to the cinema to watch a movie that we thought we wanted to see, but it ends up being offensive and degrading. Welcome to the world.

This world comes with what feels like an irresistible pull, an unholy tractor beam. The physical earth exerts gravity that firmly plants us on terra firma, but there's something else—something spiritual—that pulls us down. The tug of the world splashes spiritual mud and grime on our consciences. It makes us feel dirty.

We can't get away from it either. Even if we tried, the best we could do is leave one mud pit for another. We're stuck and it makes it seem as though our faith is stuck too. When darkness envelopes, faith can feel ineffectual, insignificant, and irrelevant. The light of faith seems to grow dim when surrounded by thick clouds shutting out faith.

The world impacted by sin means we encounter outbursts of anger, violence, destruction, and deception from others against us; physical illness, since sin leads to death; all turmoil, strife, and division, skepticism and unbelief, sensuality and lust; the pursuit of power and greed, which can easily disrupt our jobs and security; and manipulative forces that treat people as being dispensable. The world can hurt us. It tries to.

That is to say the evil forces in the world do not simply put a negative pall over the environment—as if worldly evil simply made life gloomier—but this spiritual condition within the culture can bring forces pinpointed against us. The Christian can be persecuted by the world. The Lord Jesus acknowledged as much in the Sermon on the Mount. The Lord taught, as recorded in Matthew 5:10, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The promise of the kingdom of heaven is encouraging and

sweet, but the persecution on account of a life lived according to God’s righteousness? Not so inspirational. We don’t get all warm and fuzzy inside at the promise of persecution. The world, however, shouts at the Christian, “Be more tolerant,” even when the Christian’s faith is no longer tolerated. This is a catch-22, but the world doesn’t care. All it wants is for Christians to shut up already and keep their religion to themselves.

And as if this state of affairs isn’t bad enough, it gets worse.

THE DEVIL

The world is only half of what stands against us from the outside. God’s Word also warns, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). The world is not the only external cause of sin; so are the devil and demons. This is where we start to lose people. It is one thing to acknowledge social maladies and to possibly permit that there is something abstract called “evil” out there in the culture, but a personal being called “the devil”? This is hard for some folks to accept.

The New Testament, however, won’t permit us to argue that the Scriptures present a worldview that does not differentiate between physical and spiritual maladies. The New Testament is full of medical diagnoses of physical ailments. Leprosy, hemorrhaging, and fevers are not said to be from the demonic. Distinct from these physical ailments, however, are certain spiritual conditions in Scripture that require exorcism. These conditions are clearly attributed to the demonic. Even apart from possession, the apostle Paul himself suffered the effects of “a thorn . . . in the flesh, a messenger of Satan” (2 Corinthians 12:7). We don’t know how this manifested itself, but we do know that it caused the apostle to suffer.

These spiritual assaults from the evil one remind us that

he was a murderer from the beginning (see John 8:44). His mission is to destroy and to lead others to join his condemned state. He is the ultimate reminder that misery loves company. Again, he wants to devour (see 1 Peter 5:8), and he fires flaming darts/missiles at God's children (see Ephesians 6:16). All of this means that we can feel as though we are under spiritual attack.

EVEN CHRISTIANS CAN DESPAIR

Marilyn had phoned to set up an appointment for pastoral counsel. I knew just from the brief time on the phone that she was very upset. I had no idea how serious it was. She was a lifelong Christian and had held the Lutheran Confession for many years. She was an active member and in good standing in my congregation. She seemed to be a healthy Christian.

When she arrived at my study, her brokenness was visceral. I was already aware of her failed marriage, but it felt as though all the pain of that divorce had come back, and it came back at a terrible time because Marilyn had just been informed that her company was letting her go. She was now unemployed, and this while trying to provide for her young child and her brother who had recently sustained a brain injury. She was lonely, she was angry, and she was terrified. She was a mess. And she felt the weight of these things piling upon her like huge, crushing boulders. In the midst of the pressure, she was now having a crisis of faith. She knew that God's mercy is a gift, nothing she had to earn, but where was He when she needed Him most?

What made this moment in time so difficult was not just what she said but the way she said it. She was in agony. I felt as though I was witnessing someone falling into an abyss of despair. In other words, it was more than the real hardships confronting her from the world of broken promises and per-

haps some unsavory politics at the job; these things were combined with a spiritual element. Marilyn felt as though she was losing her faith.

This is the external assault against all Christians, and we need help for faith to see through such circumstances. We need help when we feel especially powerless. We need help to walk by faith and not by sight, because what we see is often distressing. There are times when the Christian might feel despair. St. Paul described his own experience with his fellow missionaries: “We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself” (2 Corinthians 1:8). If you have ever felt this way, you’re not alone.

EVIL IN THE BROADER CULTURE

But what happens when the stain of sin and the attacks of the evil one come upon whole societies? What happens when the disease reaches national proportions?

In the history of the world, great civilizations were just that, once upon a time—great. Until they collapsed upon themselves. No longer great, but destroyed. Why? It seems a gross oversimplification, but there is truth involved: they became so in love with created things that they lost track of the Creator.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel is a case study. The political and social conditions as they approached the Assyrian catastrophe in 722 BC were ripe for implosion. The collapse came after crass immorality had taken over. Israel became too worldly for her own good. In the days of the prophet Amos, Israel had regained her former splendor as in the days of Solomon. A time of prosperity was upon the nation, but it was a prosperity that could not hide what was corrupt and rotten underneath.

Part of the problem was that life became too easy. For example, Israel leading up to 722 BC did not know enemy oppression. It had not known warfare. How might these conditions apply to American generations? There is the so-called “greatest generation.” Consider their time: They grew up during the Great Depression and they experienced World War II. Hardship brought the need to fight, not only against real political enemies but against laziness and living for self. Israel got to a generation that wasn’t fighting anymore but grew fat on self-indulgence.

Business and commerce were back to the levels of the glory days of the united kingdom under David and Solomon. Building flourished and the nation was proud. A haughty spirit was the status quo. Luxuries were insisted upon and homes became palaces. The rich were no longer satisfied with only one home. It got to a ridiculous point. We learn from 1 Kings 22:39 that Ahab built an ivory house. This wasn’t reserved for the king, though; Amos describes the nation in terms of “houses of ivory” (Amos 3:15).

But alongside the superrich homes was also extreme poverty. It had reached the point that some of the people were sold into slavery. There was deceit and oppression. There was no pity for the poor, and violence and robbery were commonplace. This, however, was just the half of it.

The immorality had a spiritual component. The nation lost the hallmark of her theocratic identity: the worship of the Lord and only the Lord. She entered idolatry, the worship of false gods. Jeroboam I made idolatry the official religion of the Northern Kingdom. With idolatry came other problems, like superstition and witchcraft. The occult flourished. Enough was enough. God let Assyria completely take over Israel.

Someone might object to comparing the United States to a theocratic nation. The United States is not that. We’re a re-

public, and many identify with an extreme version of the separation of church and state. This distinction, however, cannot escape the basic problem. If one insists that our case study not be a theocratic nation like Israel, then so be it. If we search for a nation in history more similar to our polytheistic and secular state, then consider Rome. Rome became so corrupt that she could no longer sustain herself. Worldliness can destroy any nation.

It would be a mistake, however, to reduce the corrosion of a nation to a lack of morality. There is always a spiritual condition—and practice—in the backdrop. Indeed, the United States of America, though being “secular,” is not a nation without spirituality. Secularism is not synonymous with atheism. Most citizens claim some sort of belief system. Luther wrote in the Large Catechism, “You can easily see and sense how the world practices only false worship and idolatry. For no people have ever been so corrupt that they did not begin and continue some divine worship. Everyone has set up as his special god whatever he looked to for blessings, help, and comfort.”¹ This is still happening. And where the world does its best to deny the one true God, the evil one is also there, keeping us religious, but in the wrong ways.

We are, however, reminded: “Just let not the devil and the world deceive you with their show, which indeed remains for a time, but finally is nothing.”²

TWO-PRONGED ATTACK FROM THE OUTSIDE

This external one-two punch, therefore, confronts us both individually and corporately. And when it happens, it is easy for even lifelong Christians to enter a faith crisis. We’re living in this mess and it’s not difficult to find Christians bewildered

1 ¹LC I 17.

2 LC I 46.

as to how to live out their faith in a world so dead set against it. How do we even begin to shine the light of faith under such conditions?

There are many reasons to wonder. A colleague in the ministry once shared that he had been given the opportunity to thoroughly communicate the saving Gospel to a close friend. His presentation was buttressed by solid apologetics demonstrating the reliability of the biblical text as well as evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His witness to the sin problem condemning us to death was powerful; and his testimony to the pure saving Gospel leading to life and salvation was pristine. The Spirit of God was with my fellow pastor. His friend listened carefully. At the end of the time for consideration for what God has done for us in His Son, Jesus Christ, for our justification and reconciliation (Romans 5), the friend was finally ready to respond: “I am convinced that everything you’ve shared with me is true.” This was cause for elation, but then the friend continued, “But I can’t accept it right now, because I’m having too much fun.” He was quite simply unwilling to give up his entanglements with the world and his compact with the devil.

How can faith see through this cultural, worldly, and demonic situation? Again, we need help, but first we must continue to understand the full extent of our predicament. When we do understand, when the lens of our faith becomes clearer, then we are no longer mastered by the world and the enemy.

Remember Marilyn? At the end of the day, there was only one thing I could offer her. Through the Word of Christ, Holy Absolution, and the intentional return to her Holy Baptism into Jesus Christ (all of this was a return to the Word), I witnessed—over time—a transformation. Where hopelessness once reigned, faith rose up, and I saw my sister in Christ become stronger than she had ever been. Still, it is vital for us to

have a full view of what we are up against. It's not just the stuff that confronts us from the outside but also that which causes us to be embattled from within.

CHAPTER ONE DISCUSSION GUIDE:

STRUGGLING WITH THE OUTSIDE

UNCOVER INFORMATION

1. How does one differentiate between the concept of *culture* and the concept of *creation*?
2. Explain the two ways in which the word *world* is used.
3. How does Scripture describe the *devil*?
4. How can whole nations show signs of evil?
5. Describe *despair*.

DISCOVER MEANING

1. What about the culture should we thank God for and embrace? What about the culture should we guard against?
2. How does 1 John 2:15–17 describe the *world*?
3. Besides the fact that it seems contrary to Scripture, what's wrong with reducing the devil to an abstraction?
4. In considering the overall nation, what is the seeming association between crass immorality and what is believed in? How can these undermine a nation?
5. Can a Christian with genuine faith go through despair? Why or why not?

EXPLORE IMPLICATIONS

1. Consider this statement: Christians are in the world, but not of the world. Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. If you agree with the above statement, how does the Christian live in the balance?
3. How might the devil's attempts to "devour" and the unleashing of his flaming darts/missiles translate into what we experience in life?
4. Luther's quote about the world setting up false worship and idolatry is an important warning. How do these impact the Christian seeking to live in true faith?
5. If a Christian is in despair, what might help him or her?