

by Todd Peperkorn

Luther's Dark Days

Anfechtungen, affliction and clinical depression

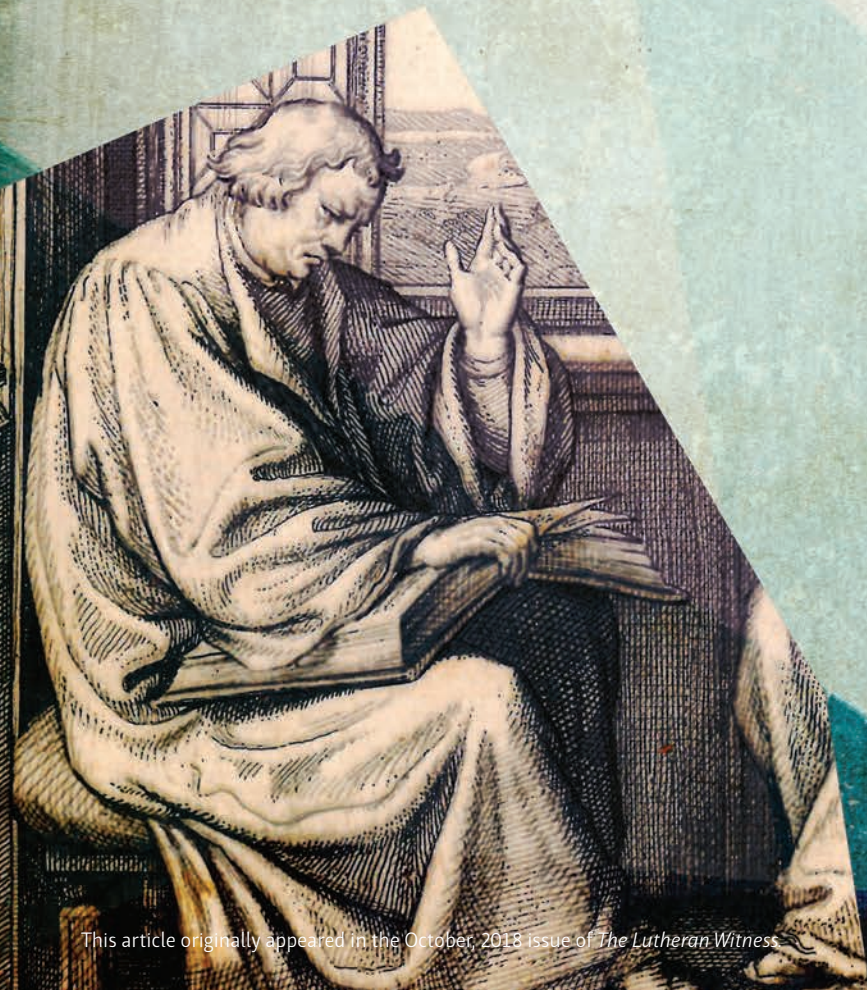
When you become a Christian, you are baptized into Christ's suffering and death, and suffering becomes part of your spiritual DNA. Moreover, you also find yourself wearing a giant spiritual bullseye on your chest. Satan is going to attack you daily with everything he's got, flinging your own sins back at you, showing you your weaknesses and exposing you to evil and "other great shame and vice," as the Catechism puts it so picturesquely.

For Luther, this deep personal struggle — with sin, human frailty, satanic attacks and the call to Christ-like self-sacrifice — was called *Anfechtung*, and he was no stranger to it. Indeed, Luther reported suffering regular bouts of *Anfechtungen* throughout his life, both before and after the key events of the Reformation. This kind of trial is something that every Christian, to one degree or another, faces throughout their lifetime. We may be more aware of it at some times than others, but St. Peter's words always ring true: "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 PETER 5:8).

But how does the spiritual distress Luther and so many other Christians have experienced throughout history relate to 21st century understandings of mental illness? Indeed, many contemporary readers familiar with Luther's experience have wondered: Was he suffering from clinical depression? Could his affliction have been primarily physiological, the result of chemical imbalances in his brain, and not purely spiritual? How do we tell the difference? Can the anguish Luther felt — and that we also may be feeling — be both mental *and* spiritual?

As a pastor who has battled clinical depression for years, I've often faced questions like this from confused and hurting people. While I can't speak to every situation — and I know that personal suffering never comes with easy answers — I can say that I have come to view clinical depression as a helpful lens through which we can see how Satan tries to use *any* illness against us, and how God can and does use it for our good.

The definition I've come to use to explain clinical depression goes something like this: Depression is an all-encompassing low or severe mood that is often accompanied by a loss of self-esteem, interest in the outside world and



pleasure in any regular activities. It does not span days or weeks, but months and years. Everyone has up and down times, good days and bad days. That's part of being human. But clinical depression means that something has changed for a person at a very basic level. It may have been triggered by a traumatic event. It may be the result of a chemical imbalance in the brain. There may be physical causes or spiritual causes (or both). Most likely it is a combination of several factors. It may slowly creep up or it might grab a person by the throat and not let go.

One thing is certain about clinical depression, though: It dramatically and painfully forces you in upon yourself. Interacting with the outside world becomes so hard that your world gradually becomes smaller and smaller and smaller, until all that is left is you. This can cut you off from hearing God's Word and promises and can create a circle of self-defeating thoughts that may seem impossible to overcome. Does depression sound fun? It is not. Believe me.

This is where Luther's great insight into the Gospel — born in part of his own internal struggles — is so helpful. Depression teaches us to despair, or turn in on ourselves, and at the very heart of the matter, to believe that we deserve every problem and every bad thing that has ever happened to us. What both the Scriptures and Luther teach us is that we do indeed deserve nothing but punishment. The Gospel, though, is that God does not give us what we deserve. He gives us Jesus, forgiveness, life and all good things. Because of Christ, God is not in the “make your life miserable” business, even if it may feel that way at times.

In Christ, I can look at every affliction (including clinical depression) not as something

that happens because I am going to hell and God doesn't love me, but rather, as proof positive that the devil is hard at work, trying to draw me away from Jesus and His promises. As we read in Titus chapter three,

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (TITUS 3:4)

Was Luther clinically depressed? I can't really answer that question. Although there does seem to be some evidence for it, diagnosing historical figures is always a dangerous business. What I can say with certainty is that Luther knew what it meant to be afflicted. He knew, too, however, that affliction isn't a sign of God's hatred. It is a sign of how much Satan wants to tear us away from Jesus. But that isn't going to happen, to Luther or to me, even when my depression brain tells me otherwise.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (ROM. 8:38–39)

Thank God for that! LW

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IN HIS OWN WORDS: *Luther on spiritual anguish*

“At such a time God seems terribly angry, and with him the whole creation. At such a time there is no flight, no comfort, within or without, but all things accuse. At such a time as that the Psalmist mourns, ‘I am cut off from thy sight’ [Cf. Ps. 31:22], or at least he does not dare to say, ‘O Lord, ... do not chasten me in thy wrath’ [Ps. 6:1]. In this moment (strange to say) the soul cannot believe that it can ever be redeemed other than that the punishment is not yet

completely felt. Yet the soul is eternal and is not able to think of itself as being temporal. All that remains is the stark-naked desire for help and a terrible groaning, but it does not know where to turn for help. In this instance the person is stretched out with Christ so that all his bones may be counted, and every corner of the soul is filled with the greatest bitterness, dread, trembling, and sorrow in such a manner that these all last forever.”

(from Martin Luther's *Explanations of the 95 Theses* (LW 35:129))

