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Chapter 14

LUTHER'S DANGEROUS ACCOUNT OF DIVINE HIDDENNESS

Steven D. Paulson

God speaks! So we speak of God. I have long found this to be the great contribution of Eberhard Jüngel. That God speaks is not necessary; God is free and could have remained silent, but has not. So when God speaks it is 'more than necessary'. It is fecund. We might say that God speaking is an accident, but a fortunate one for us – otherwise, we seem to have no way of answering what Jüngel calls the ultimate, 'despairing question of our human experience: why does anything exist at all? Why not nothing?'¹

Yet my fascination with Jüngel's theology began with the answer to another question from human experience, 'Why would God hide?' To this question, Jüngel attaches stern warnings about dealing with the hiddenness of God – it can 'offer shelter to all sorts of ideas.'² Apparently some of those ideas can be very dangerous, especially when one follows Luther too closely, since the matter of God hiding cuts to the quick of a person's life. Even the bare question, 'Why would God hide?', involves great risk since divine hiddenness is not a neutral concept, but an experience we suffer and so is a matter of life or death – to be or not to be. Jüngel simply calls it 'the experience of evil,'³ which forces out Schelling's purely abstract question: 'Why does anything exist at all? Why not nothing?' Such is the experience of an absolute God.

Jüngel further warns that the question of God's hiddenness is often used as a 'foil for other theological concepts.'⁴ So Karl Rahner claimed that the mystery of *deus absconditus* fulfils humans,⁵ while Luther said *deus absconditus* destroys

1. Eberhard Jüngel, 'The Revelation of the Hiddenness of God', in *Theological Essays II*, ed. John B. Webster, trans. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast (Edinburgh, T&T Clark), p. 122.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

5. 'The *deus absconditus* is the source of truth for man, which is freely bestowed upon him and determines his identity'. Karl Rahner, SJ, 'The Hiddenness of God', in *Theological Investigations XVI*, trans. David Morland (New York: Crossroad, 1979), p. 238.

humans: 'From this absolute God everyone should flee who does not want to perish, because human nature and the absolute God . . . are the bitterest of enemies. Human weakness cannot help being crushed by such majesty, as Scripture reminds us over and over.'⁶ What shall we make of this conflict?

Rahner's use of the hidden God as the goal of desire led directly to his principle equating economic and immanent trinity that has won the day in modern theology. Indeed, the rule's attempt is noble, and seems to echo Luther's own parable: having Christ in the word of promise, you also have the hidden God. So the conclusion seems irresistible: 'The hiddenness of God under its opposite, as Luther called it, cannot however mean that in this particular hiddenness God contradicts himself, but rather must mean that God *corresponds* to himself in this hiddenness.'⁷ While it is true that having Christ in his word you also have the hidden God, it is not true that the two correspond so as to absorb the difference in a greater unity. For Luther, at least, this assurance for faith (having come through a true experience with evil) is not the equation of economic work and immanent being of the trinity. Nor is it a correspondence of God with God that overcomes hiddenness with revelation. It is rather the one and only true end of God opposing or contradicting God. The end of the absolute God is absolution. Nothing else will do.

If there is any theology hiding behind this description, it is none other than the ability to distinguish the law and gospel, which happens not in abstract thought, but in the preached word given to a sinner experiencing the hidden God. The question forced out of a person in contact with *deus absconditus* is not the abstract 'Why is there anything, why not nothing?' but the life-and-death question, 'What does God think of me, in particular?' So here I seek to honour Professor Jüngel with an exploration of why Luther took a different path than the theologians of Barth's Trinitarian revival on this matter of God's hiddenness – not an incidental matter!

Two Kinds of Hiddenness

Most theologians agree that there are at least two 'modes' of God's hiddenness. One is absolute God, a mystery, in which God in some fashion is *not revealed*. In the other, God is revealed, but paradoxically remains hidden. Christ crucified is God revealed, but not in the way we expected, so that hiddenness somehow remains. Typically, these two are put on an axis whose poles are 'infinite' and 'finite'. The problem in this way of thinking occurs when one experiences 'finitude' and has no way of bridging the chasm to become infinite. The finite wants to become infinite, but cannot accomplish it. This strikes the finite subject as 'evil', which is synonymous with inescapable death. The worst form of evil is unrighteous

6. Martin Luther, Commentary on Psalm 51, *LW* 12, p. 312.

7. Jüngel, 'The Revelation of the Hiddenness of God', p. 130.

suffering that cannot be aligned with any law or reasonable punishment. What is worse, unjust suffering is not merely the experience of several unfortunate individuals, but is universal for finite creatures. The solution is for God to come down, that is, for the infinite to become finite, and so the actual must somehow open into the infinite possible.

This process makes God's hiddenness into two corresponding movements of God's special being in becoming. Either hiddenness is an epistemological matter in which the limit of human knowing (the experience of evil) is overcome by a greater motion that opens to the mystery of the divine. Or hiddenness is something of an ontological matter by which God's being changes so that human beings can change too: the finite can become infinite in some way, thus overcoming death by making the finite infinite.

What Luther proposed was neither epistemological nor ontological in this way, but verbal. The real distinction concerning God hiding is not that between infinite and finite, it is between God preached and not preached, and so deliverance for the bound depends upon getting a preacher. But before we get to Luther we should note that the secret of the best theology produced at the end of the twentieth century was the rediscovery and repurposing of Martin Luther's *deus absconditus* under the sign of its opposite, or simply the cross of Jesus Christ. Compared to what preceded in liberal Protestantism, this was quite a rich discovery. The cross was the moment when God hid most deeply so as not to be desired – a scandalous, crucified *man* – which marked a great contradiction in the normal theology of glory. At the same time, this cross was no less than God, so that we truly have a crucified *God* under a sign contradicting all things divine.

This crucified God was repurposed, however, unleashing the soteriological assumption that God 'for us' cannot be other than God 'in and for himself'. Thus a bridge, or ladder, was built to move from one to the other. The Christological assumption followed that God is never without Christ, especially in the supralapsarian election or the infinite future. Like falling dominoes the theological assumption then followed that freedom of will is the essence of God, and such a divine will never contradict itself but correspond to itself – it does not change. Even the contradiction of the cross serves the greater correspondence of God. Essence and existence are the same for God, and so the Trinitarian assumption also followed: the economic trinity is the immanent trinity, and vice versa. This conclusion serves as the high-water mark of the twentieth-century theology that we know today as 'Rahner's rule'. History became divine, not as mere progress towards a goal but as a great contradiction in the cross that is overcome by a greater correspondence of God's being in becoming. The unchangeable essence of the divine served as the bedrock assurance of salvation, and that essence is a decision before all time for Christ or the inevitable infinite of that decision.

Would such rules be kept! But the problem is that we cannot impose Rahner's rule, epistemologically or ontologically, outside preaching. The attempt fails because sinners will not do it – they insist upon securing their assurance that there

is not some other Marcionite God out there (which they strongly suspect), by reason's correspondence with reality. They call it 'faith seeking understanding'. But sinners on the way to security end up dividing God into a good God who rewards, and an evil one who allows or applies unjust suffering.

Luther's distinction of preached and unpreached does not so divide God according to the dream of a sinner, and after all it is with such sinners, not neutral beings, that we have to deal in theology. That means Luther is not pursuing a theology of faith seeking understanding. Such a pursuit reduces hiddenness to epistemology: a matter of how much knowledge can be added to faith in order to let us see the beauty of God's glory.

So, the matter of God's hiddenness marks a divide in modern theology. One can follow Luther in the dangerous distinction between God as preached or not preached; or one can make a daring decision to take up the question of evil only after affirming that God is love, the unknown possible over the known actual. Modern theology has chosen the latter, and its primary mark is the word 'evil'. Evil has substituted for sin as the basic dilemma in life, especially in its purest sense of innocent, unjust suffering. Innocent suffering is not 'I the sinner', but the cry of righteousness against God who either does it, or allows it (the difference between those finally dissolving into insignificance). The innocent sufferer is left to conclude that God either cannot overcome evil (Manichaeism), or that God is evil. Against these, theology must then throw up a rampart or reason would drive one to atheism: 'Why do I suffer? That is the rock of atheism.'⁸ Justification may continue to be the central proposition of theology in this situation, but it ceases being the justification of the sinner before God, and becomes the justification of God before the sufferer, or theodicy.

When the hiddenness of God is taken up as theodicy, it displaces Luther's discussion of preaching with a discussion of faith seeking understanding. That is, in order to stave off the inevitable atheism that comes from innocent suffering, faith must find its certainty not in the preached word, but in the *a priori* assurance of God's essence as love. Otherwise, when evil arrives (as it always does), and the innocent suffer (as they always do) they will have no ground for faith. They will not be able to distinguish between God and evil, and end up like Job teetering upon the atheist's decision to curse God and die.

Of course, the consequence is great for theology. Evil cannot then really *be*, it must be a mistaken category, a *non-being*. Only God really is, and so only love has being. God's hate *is* not, though it certainly has dire consequences for those who believe in it rather than God's love. Consequently, the cross of Christ is repurposed as God absorbing suffering. The Friday of the cross must then actually become a speculative Good Friday. That cannot be done simply by the humanity of Jesus, or even the person of Christ, but the whole trinity is needed, and so patripassionism is the result. The Father, too, must suffer. Evil in the finite world is finally

8. Jüngel, 'The Revelation of the Hiddenness of God', p. 143 quoting Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death*, trans. Howard Brenton and Jane Margaret Fry (London, 1982), p. 43.

conquered by the infinite God absorbing it – but not being overcome by it. This is love. Therefore, only the certainty that ‘God is love’ serving as an ontological, a priori, assertion, ‘enables us to endure the question of evil as an unanswerable question . . .’⁹ It is not sin that is taken upon the cross, but suffering. That may seem like a small adjustment on Paul’s crucial word, ‘that the one who knew no sin, became sin,’ but the result is quite dramatic: ‘the one who knew no suffering, absorbed suffering.’ Then it is not actually the death of Christ that matters, but His suffering. Furthermore, that suffering is not over.

Consequently, preaching is delivered to sufferers rather than sinners – the innocent rather than the guilty, since the conundrum of faith is unjust suffering at the core. So it seems that people must be brought to a ‘point of decision,’ between affirming God as love in the midst of evil suffering (which makes love triumph over evil), or to allow evil to overtake God’s love, in which case there is only hatred of fate: ‘After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth’ (Job 3:1). The moment of decision is only created by the preacher when the sufferer is offered a picture of God as someone desirable so that the decision can possibly favour rather than despise God. So the enticing picture must be absolute, it must be beyond doubt, and secured as ‘certain.’ Yet the only certainty lies outside the world of finite suffering, outside time, in the infinite world where there is no suffering. So, time and history themselves have become metaphors for suffering.

When innocent suffering is the problem, the solution is not to remove the innocence, but the suffering. There must be a correspondence not only between God and God, humans and God, but also between the law and gospel. Innocence cannot be defeated by this injustice; it must be rewarded, if not in this life, then in the next. Suffering ends not only by its cessation, but also by its compensation. The law must actually be fulfilled, not only in Christ, but also in all the sufferers of the world. In this way possibility emerges, in the wake of Bultmann, as greater than actuality since only possibility allows decisions between alternative choices.

In the end, the means left at the disposal of a preacher is metaphor. Metaphor creates possibilities that did not previously exist, and so makes room for a decision where previously (in the midst of suffering like Job’s) one could only end up cursing God for evil. For this reason, ‘pleading ought to be the constitutive element of proclamation.’¹⁰

Modern theology is nothing if not chaste. In the end we do not get an answer to the question of evil, since it is an unanswerable question by its, or God’s, nature. But ‘the certainty that “God is love” enables us to endure the question of evil as an unanswerable question . . .’¹¹

9. Jüngel, ‘The Revelation of the Hiddenness of God,’ p. 143.

10. Eberhard Jüngel, ‘The World as Possibility and Actuality: The Ontology of the Doctrine of Justification,’ in *Theological Essays I*, trans. John B. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), p. 120.

11. Jüngel, ‘The Revelation of the Hiddenness of God,’ p. 143.

This sweep of modern theology demands us to say ‘no’ to Luther on the hidden God. His distinction is odious because it seems to give us not two Gods, as is often erroneously suggested, but one God who uses the instrument of evil. How can we get to the assertion ‘God is love’ (not only as a possibility, but also as a certainty) from there? Luther, it seems, does not address the malady of modern humanity – innocent suffering, and leaves us with Job and no way out.

It is true that with Luther the basic human problem is not innocent suffering, though he is fully aware of such, since the Psalms are full of the cries, ‘I am innocent’. He is also fully aware of the need for certainty; faith is not a mix of trust and doubt, but absolute assurance. But where is this certainty found? Not in the daring decision of the theologian that ‘God is love’. That is one matter to believe when you are not suffering and quite another when you are on trial before God without a defender in damnation and death. Luther would seem to be left behind in the march of modern theology towards theodicy, and even a dangerous darkness that must be avoided lest we reproduce the mistakes of German theology in the twentieth century – that there is a hidden God who must be believed and obeyed apart from the preached God in the promise of Christ. To the contrary, for Luther the hidden God apart from preaching must be worshipped by fleeing, not by seeking or obeying.

Luther’s Hidden God

But for Luther, preachers cannot make God desirable for the will’s decisions. Knowing that should actually free them, since convincing people that ‘God is Love’ is a notable failure inside Christendom and out. So what does Luther mean by God hiding? Luther concludes that God does not correspond with God, but that God conflicts with God. Likewise, God’s hiddenness is not the fulfilment of humans, but their death. This, in turn, means that while a possibility is indeed greater than an actuality (in contrast to Aristotle and the common sense), a promise is more than – and even opposed to – a possibility that opens space for faith seeking understanding. It is not only an increase of being that happens in faith, but also a real contradiction, a real death before the new creation. So new creation is more than ‘space for God’ in this world; preaching is more than pleading that demands.

To understand what Luther is saying, let us take the case of Jacob, since this plays an important role in the preaching of Christ and Paul. There is a contradiction at the core of the story of the amazing transference of Primogeniture. Earlier Rebecca had received the strange word, ‘the elder shall serve the younger’ (Genesis 25:23), which she understood not as metaphor seeking understanding, but as a promise seeking its moment of application. Its time came when Isaac had grown old, and Rebecca heard him preparing Esau for the blessing of Primogeniture as demanded by law, whence she turned to

Jacob and announced, 'Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you' (Genesis 27:8). Luther called this a 'the faithful deceit'. The fact that it was deceit has occupied all the prior exegetes who asked, 'Did Rebecca and Jacob have the right to lie?' But this is a place and time where the 'universal law' was punctured, and God moved against God so as to become preached rather than unpreached. Such a moment is always marked by the end of a law, and a giving of a promise given precisely to the ungodly rather than the innocent sufferer. Therefore, it is important that Jacob and Rebecca are unworthy. But it is more important to say that faith follows the Word, not the rule, when these two inevitably conflict. Specifically, the particular word that faith follows is the word of promise which stands necessarily outside the law and in direct contradiction to it.

Now, persons who have power in the world – Isaac in this case – try to rule over the Word itself (and so over the Holy Spirit). They want the promise to go where – and to whom – they intend it to go, according to their own mechanism of desire, even when their desire is the *summum bonum* like the love or law of God. So we come upon the distinction between the 'Rule and Exception'. Isaac clings only to the Rule (Primogeniture – which is to say the material cause); Rebecca clings only to the Promise (the Exception) who is Jacob, not Esau (i.e. the formal cause). At that moment, the Promise is contrary and must be trusted and followed despite its opposition to the Rule. So the great conclusion is reached: 'Therefore Rebecca gave thought to how she might be able to deceive her husband Isaac, her son Esau, and all who were in the house'; 'for now she is not obeying the rule or the law. Now she is obeying God! – Who transfers and dispenses contrary to the rule. Therefore she did not sin.'¹²

Lying to get the blessing was a sin under the unpreached God, but not the preached. This is different than merely the impossible becoming possible. It has a contradiction in it that is never merely a 'moment' sublated for something that unites the principle and its contradiction. It has to do with what is happening to the law itself. The first table of the commandments concerning God usually 'embraces' the second concerning such things as obedience to parents. But when the second table comes into opposition to the first, it must yield – as in Christ's, 'If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple' (Luke 14:26). Why can they not be disciples? Since they would be following the law, not God. They hold to the rule, not the exception, and it is the exception alone that makes one righteous. The exception is the promise of forgiveness that is never merely opening possibility, but is a new creation. So it is more than actuality, and more than possibility. In this amazing transference of Primogeniture, God abrogates the law.

12. LW 5, p. 114.

Understanding does not grasp this, only the outstanding faith of Rebecca upholds her frightened son at the moment of the deception: ‘His mother said to him, “Upon me be your curse, my son; only obey my word, and go, fetch them to me”’ (Genesis 27:13). Faith alone devours the sin and such foolish plans of the saints, not understanding that empowers a hearer to make a right decision. At the moment the plan was to be spoiled, we are taught the power of faith, ‘that to him who believes all things are possible. For faith causes that which does not exist to exist, and makes possible everything that is impossible.’¹³ Here is the great truth of possibility being more than, and greater than, actuality. Faith creates *ex nihilo*. But the common mistake is to think of faith as an inner power, or something extended into the future by thought, since faith precisely has nothing to cling to: ‘the possible, the unfulfilled, is only an outline, a guess at what might have been.’¹⁴ This was Bultmann’s mistake. But faith creates a blessing where there is only a curse, not without a Word, but by clinging to a Word as Rebecca did.

Moreover, the word is not a metaphor. It is a specific promise. It doesn’t make up its own word, but it hangs upon the Word given by God’s proclamation, and there makes a blessing where there was none – in fact where there was only blessing’s opposite in a curse. This is the power of faith: ‘he who has the Word of God should consider himself blessed and should turn his eyes away from present things to those that lie in the future and are invisible.’¹⁵ Only faith takes us from the present of a graspable promise that comes by hearing with faith to the hidden future. The feeling of the present curse is set aside for the promised future.

This is not without worldly metaphor, even though it is not itself a metaphor: If I give you a \$100 bill, you look away from the present, which is that you have been given a simple set of pictures on a thin piece of paper. But you look away from that present reality to the future promise signed on the paper by the secretary of the Treasury which says, ‘We will stand behind this.’ This lets you purchase some material thing that you need – food or clothing – even though you don’t see them yet. You trust that these will come from grasping this piece of paper. So Luther continued, ‘Faith attaches itself to a thing that is still an utter nothing and waits until everything comes about.’ This Christian *meditatio* is unlike all other disciplines of knowledge that are based on syllogisms, inductions and experiments. Those, Luther noted, do not begin with what is nothing – especially not the unseen, impossible, absurd and foolish. But faith is that ‘which takes hold of the promise, fixes the heart on what is altogether absurd, impossible, and contained in the Word and God’s promise.’

It is the last phrase of the sentence to which we turn for the second matter of hiddenness: ‘For whatever faith dictates and the Word promises must be done, because God is the Word and the Word is God (John 1:1). He who has the Word

13. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

14. Thomas Mann, *Lotte in Weimar* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 187. Quoted in Jüngel, ‘The World as Possibility and Actuality’, p. 122.

15. *LW* 5, 128.

has the power of God (Rom 1:16). Spirit works this way, giving 'no one faith through mere speculations. No, He gives it through the Word'. So the great battle of Spirit and flesh is this: the 'things of the Holy Spirit are not apparent, everything seems hostile and dead. But when the heart takes hold of the Word, then the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit follows, and the power and might to do amazing things'.¹⁶ This is not a case of the love of God overcoming the Omnipotence of God, but the key is 'so he blessed him' which is 'definite and given' so that it is now 'unalterable and confirmed . . . for the Holy Spirit does not revoke His operations'. Omnipotence and love here kiss, and Luther underlined the point with Malachi 3:6 'God does not change', and Romans 11:29: 'The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable'. When God has rendered a verdict, He does not change or retract it, like humans are used to doing. 'So he blessed him: that is, it had happened'.

Here we have to distinguish two kinds of blessings. An ordinary blessing says: "would that you were well and in full possession of your strength!" but the sickness remains. A real blessing, however, 'is not merely imprecative, but indicative and constitutive, the thing itself which it says it really [*re*, not *spe*] gives and brings'.¹⁷ In the real blessing the indicative neither yields merely the actual, nor even the imperative possibility, but a truly new creation. If I had said to you merely, 'I would your sins were forgiven you'. Or, 'I wish you grace, mercy, the eternal kingdom and deliverance from your sins', this could be called a blessing of love [*charitatis benedictio*], says Luther, but 'the blessing of a promise, of faith, and of a gift that is at hand [*Sed benedictio promissionis et fidei et praesentis doni haec est*] is this: I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; that is, I reconcile your soul to God, remove from you God's wrath and displeasure, put you in His grace, and give you the inheritance of eternal life and the kingdom of heaven . . . Accordingly they are not blessings that express wishes; they are blessings that have the power to bestow [*Non igitur benedictiones imprecativae sunt, sed collativae*].'¹⁸

There is the greatest difference between the hidden and revealed God when it comes to the blessing (Word or Promise). So great is the contradiction that virtue itself is opposed with a deceitful faith that devours sin as well as the law. In the amazing transference of Primogeniture, Rebecca and Esau mark the contradiction between God with his word and God without, preached and not preached, and so the contradiction between the Rule and the Exception. With this, we turn to the next great matter of divine hiddenness, in what way this promise that takes you from the hidden God also gives that hidden God to you in what is an important alternative to Rahner's Rule in Luther's parable: If you have Christ, then you have the hidden God also.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

17. *In scriptura sancta autem sunt reales benedictiones, non imprecativae tantum, sed indicativae et constitutivae, quae hoc ipsum, quod sonat re ipsa largiuntur et adferunt.* WA 43, p. 525.3–5, cf. LW 5, p. 140.

18. WA 43, p. 525:11–7.

Christ and the Hidden God

Luther is adamant: 'Apart from this Word all life is condemned',¹⁹ there is a contradiction between the law and law, between the law and gospel and indeed between God and God, and so God hides from Jacob so as not to be found in his absoluteness but only in his word. But Luther knows there is at least a correspondence, or better, 'having', that exists between Christ and the hidden God. This is hiddenness under the sign of his opposite in which having the revealed Christ is at once having the hidden God.

How is it that we 'have' the hidden God when we have the revealed, since these are opposed? The word is not a mirror or window that opens unto the divine as if it were a starting point or launching pad for the speculation that rises above the word. So Luther liked to recall that 'a certain hermit in *The Lives of the Fathers* advises his hearers against speculations of this kind'. He says: 'If you see that someone has put his foot in heaven, pull him back. For this is how saintly neophytes are wont to think about God apart from Christ'. There is no bridge between economic and immanent like that. But in fact, there is no need to move from economic to immanent for 'if you have Him, then you also have the hidden God together with Him who has been revealed'. That is the only way, the truth and the life (cf. John 14:6). Apart from it, you will find nothing but destruction and death.²⁰

So it is that the story of Jacob continues so that Isaac had not only given the *blessing*, but also now added a *wish* at his son's departure: 'God almighty bless you and make you fruitful . . .' (Genesis 28:3). This allowed Luther to mark the difference between two ways of dealing with the future and its possibility. One is through prayer/wish/'plea', and the other is through a proclamation/blessing. Only the latter can deal with the hidden God, since the blessing, 'is the very thing that has been handed over and given forthwith'. Just as Baptism and forgiveness of sins are handed over and given forthwith: 'for I do *not hope* for the remission of sins, but I *have it* forthwith', it is not that Christ will suffer for me, but has. It is not merely possibility over actuality (though it is certainly that), but now something even greater has emerged to move us into the future than possibility.

But reason does not grasp this distinction. It cannot. This is the constant course of the church and its saints: 'that promises are made and that then those who believe the promises are treated in such a way that they are compelled to wait for things that are hidden, to believe what they do not see, and to hope for what does not appear'.²¹ So Jacob took his blessing along with the prayer of his father on his journey towards Haran and dreamt of the ladder into heaven with angels ascending and descending, a dream interpreted by Christ in John 1 simply as: 'God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'.

19. *LW* 5, p. 71.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

Why the ascent and descent? Luther answered, 'that in one and the same Person there is true GOD and man . . . of such a kind that not only the humanity has been assumed, but that which humanity has been made liable and subject to death and hell yet in that humiliation has devoured the devil, hell, and all things in itself. This is the *communicatio idiomatum*'. So Luther concluded: 'This, therefore, is the article by which the whole world, reason, and Satan are offended. For in the same Person there are things that are to the highest degree contrary.'²² But this is admittedly a new kind of contrariness than Jacob had met before. It stands under the sign of its opposite that actually gave him the hidden God – hiddenly. Only faith grasps this in Jacob or us, because it is only and always grasping the Word of promise: that 'He did this all for us . . . ascended and descended into heaven.'²³ It is no longer a possibility, but a proclaimed thing, which is nothing less than a new creation.

So 'having' the hidden God in the Word is not a result of an ontological assertion that God is love; it is an eschatological and verbal way to have the future. It is a preached God that does not depend upon an assertion of either being or becoming but who creates out of nothing. It is not a makeable future, but a made one.²⁴

So, 'Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place; and I did not know it"' (Genesis 28:16). Faith holds all of God in the word, and seeks nothing outside it. It has its surety that there is nothing more of God that lies hidden, or that is not given, because God's word is the power of life, and this depends upon his omnipotence and faithfulness: 'Now, when God speaks, he does not lie'; 'For he spoke and it came to be' (Ps. 33:9). The same thing happens to us when we are absolved from sins. It is 'founded and stands firm on the promises of God', even though we experience the opposite as Jacob did. Therefore, faith is the greatest of things, there is nowhere to go from there – especially not to understanding. Instead, we learn 'what a great thing faith is, that it is not a cold and lazy quality . . .'²⁵

Here we can nevertheless acknowledge that for faith there is a great addition, something that is clearly 'more than necessary' than the actuality we see. Yet, it is not thought and possibility, but the word *put into things*. In the word, there is no hidden God that faith does not have except that apart from the word itself (which faith abandons entirely). So the 'addition' faith makes to the old reality and its necessity of things according to the law is the promise itself to which it clings. So Luther warns that we not fall into the hole of thinking that the Word 'is an empty sound. . . . It is a great honor and majesty', however, when one says: 'This is the Word of God. I hear a man's voice. I see human gestures. The bread and the wine in the Supper are physical things. At ordination the hands of carnal men are imposed.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 221.

24. Jüngel, 'The World as Possibility and Actuality', p. 115.

25. *LW* 5, p. 235.

In Baptism ‘water is water’, but then, ‘look at that addition of the spiritual eyes to what the flesh sees.’²⁶

What is the spiritual ‘addition’ if it is not thinking that is added to faith, or a plea added to a blessing, or becoming to being, or even possibility added to actuality? Flesh sees the word in a thing, and excludes God. The word is then a ‘mere sound’. It tries to determine how infinite and finite can mix, or how the innocent can suffer. But the spirit hears ‘the Word of God, and God in the water’. That is, not an empty sound but ‘the Word of the Creator of heaven and earth’. What is being added by the Creator is not merely possibility to the old actuality, but a truly new creation. In the promise you also have the hidden God because ‘God fulfills his promises’ [in you] with definite means.²⁷ So now Romans 8:30 can be understood, ‘Those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified’. God does not want to fulfil the promises without means, but exactly through created means, in divine words, not outside. God does this only there, not as a general rule that economic is the immanent, but certainly at this point Luther’s parable is true, that ‘if you have Christ then you also have the hidden God together with Him who has been revealed.’²⁸ But it is also true that apart from having of Christ in the media of the words preached ‘all life is condemned.’²⁹ This is nothing less than the difference between God preached and not preached.

The Trial

Jacob’s story does not end there either, but when he has the blessing and in future years returns to face Esau, he prays his great prayer of deliverance: ‘Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, lest he come and slay us all, the mothers with the children. But thou didst say, “I will do you good, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude”’ (Genesis 32:11–2). Luther calls Jacob’s prayer ‘great’ because it names the God of the fathers, claims in faith that he is *my* Lord and reminds God of his promise: You said it! God’s faithfulness must rescue, not his own faith. Luther adds that ‘such prayers which are poured out in extreme despair and the greatest dangers are very pleasing to God.’³⁰ In light of this great prayer, the trial of Jacob had only begun: ‘and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day’ (Genesis 32).

Here is where Luther explicitly finds the limit of reason in relation to faith, the hiddenness of God outside Christ, precisely so that faith alone remains the place

26. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

30. *LW* 6, p. 108.

where God hides inside Christ. So it is not faith seeking understanding, but faith seeking only faith. This happens in trial or the struggle that follows the promise: 'Reason, wisdom, righteousness of the flesh, and this light of the sun God regards as dark and misty, but here the Word comes forward like a little flame shining in the midst of darkness and scattering its rays through its doctrine and the sacraments; these rays God orders to be apprehended. If we embrace them, God is no longer hidden to us in the spirit but only in the flesh.'³¹

Luther admitted this was the contrary 'play' of God, as a father teases a child about an apple in order for the child to come to the father and receive it again. Such play from God's perspective is to increase faith, but it is felt in every way as most serious and deadly. Temptation is none other than to receive the hidden God in the promise of Christ, only to proceed directly to leave it in grasping something that seems greater and more sure. Naturally no place seems surer than the possibility presented by thought which tries to secure a promise outside the promise itself. But Jacob teaches us that we go only by the Word:

If an angel came down and said, 'Do not believe these promises!' I would reject him, saying: 'Depart from me, Satan. . . . Or, if God Himself appeared to me in His majesty' and said: 'You are not worthy of My grace; I will change My plan and not keep My promise to you,' I would not have to yield to Him, but it would be necessary to fight most vehemently against God Himself. . . . If He should cast me into the depths of hell and place me in the midst of devils, I would still believe that I would be saved because I have been baptized, I have been absolved, I have received the pledge of my salvation, the body and blood of the Lord in the Supper. . . . Therefore I want to see and hear nothing else, but I shall live and die in this faith, whether God or an angel or the devil says the contrary.'³²

So neither the real question of faith is 'Why is there something and not nothing?' nor is it the modern question, 'Why is there unjust suffering?' But in faith's trial, Has God become a liar? Will He not keep His promises? The answer can be put in an exhortation: Do not let your thoughts throw away an actual Word from God. Jacob felt God stood opposed to him. His faith was assailed, but he hung onto this: I have the promise. Luther calls this the fight of faith against unfaith which cannot depend upon reason, and so he verbalized the fight in a theological dialog: 'You must perish!' 'No! That is not God's will. I shall not perish. . . . Yes and no there assailed each other very sharply and violently. . . . Even though God kills me, well, let Him kill me, but I shall still live.' Yes and no opposed each other, and though only the 'no' was felt, the 'yes' is believed.

No doubt there are dangers exploring such hiddenness outside Christ and his word, even when this is done so that these two are the only places in which God

31. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

is grasped by faith instead of thought. But the dangers of not doing so are greater yet, since adding this thought to faith removes faith from the thing in which the word is put. As Luther noted, no one can ‘adequately express in words what his [Jacob’s] thoughts were on this occasion. But such thoughts as these undoubtedly occurred to him . . . What if God has changed His viewpoint, rejected me, and received my brother into favor?’³³ But, such thoughts, and they are only thoughts, cannot become conclusions, or ‘axioms that are fixed and speak the final word’.³⁴ Unjust suffering makes people desperate, but Jacob did not discard his faith for some other sure foundation. Jacob’s faith is assailed, attacked, tried so that there is no other conclusion than that the very God who gave him the promise is now opposed to him. Still faith says, ‘I have the promise’ in the same way that Jacob got his blessing from Isaac. This means a struggle against God that must indeed conquer God. God not preached is defeated by the preached God in a pitched battle that only faith dares enter, and from which only faith can emerge again.

So Luther enjoined:

Even if He hides Himself in a room in the house and does not want access to be given to anyone, do not draw back but follow. If He does not want to listen, knock at the door of the room; raise a shout! For this is the highest sacrifice, not to cease praying and seeking until we conquer Him. He has already surrendered Himself to us so that we may be certain of victory, for He has bound Himself to HIS promises and pledged His faithfulness with an oath, saying (John 16:23): ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, He will give it to you in My name . . . These are hidden and wonderful things and known only to those who have the promises, in which they are vexed and humbled. Nevertheless, in that humiliation they come forth as victors even over God Himself’.³⁵

Here God is hidden in a contradiction which is not resolved by a correspondence, but a defeat. The same had happened at the point of the sacrifice of Isaac, where Luther concluded: ‘This trial cannot be overcome and is far too great to be understood by us. For there is a contradiction with which God contradicts Himself. It is impossible for the flesh to understand this; for it inevitably concludes either that God is lying – and this is blasphemy, or that God hates me – and this leads to despair.’³⁶

Just as Christ is hidden in God under the sign of his opposite so the church, with its promises of baptism, keys and Lord’s Supper is hidden again in God as Jacob found at the Jabbok. So we conclude, ‘God is the One who is hidden. This is His peculiar property. He is really hidden, and yet He is not hidden.’³⁷ This is none

33. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 140–3.

36. *LW* 4, p. 93.

37. *LW* 6, p. 148.

other than the necessary distinction of all theology: God not preached, and God preached. Experience alone has the distinction forced upon it; meanwhile thought struggles to make a different distinction between omnipotence and love. But an experience with experience, such as faith is, concludes that God hidden in his word conquers and 'has' God hidden outside that word. Thus, a preacher's declaration of God's promise makes a new world by which the dead rise – there is no other way, no escape. God speaks and it is finally a promise, not only a possibility, that is made.