

The God Who Hides From His Saints:

Luther's *Deus Absconditus*

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## OUTLINE

THESIS: Luther's later writings on the *Deus absconditus* most frequently address the God who hides himself from his saints in contraction to his given revelation of himself, in order to cause faith to become true faith.

- I. An Overview of the Hidden God in Luther
  - A. God's Hiddenness to Fallen Humans
    1. His essence beyond understanding
    2. His rejection of the ungodly
  - B. God's Hiddenness in the Crucified Christ
    1. The merciful cloaking of the divine
    2. The paradox of divine suffering
  - C. God's Hiddenness in the Believer's Experience
- II. Luther's Experiences of the Hidden God
  - A. Luther's Experiences of *Anfechtungen*
  - B. Luther's Experiences with Suffering
    1. Illness
    2. Deaths
    3. Persecution
- III. The God Who Hides From the Believer
  - A. His Hiddenness In His Opposite
    1. In Wrath
    2. In Rejection
    3. In Suffering
  - B. His Purpose for His Hiddenness
    1. To chastise and purify from sin
    2. To cause faith to become faith
- IV. Luther's Response to the Hidden God
  - A. Do Not Search Beyond Divine Revelation
    1. Given in Christ
    2. Given in the Word
    3. Given in the Sacraments
  - B. Stand Fast on the Word
  - C. Persevere in Faith

At the dawning of the age of Humanism where “seeing is believing,” Martin Luther, the great proponent of faith, steadfastly proclaimed a theology of a God hidden beyond human reason or senses. Drawing from his personal experience of a God who seemed to contradict his revelation of himself, Luther addresses the hiddenness of God in nearly every aspect of his theology. Indeed, Bernhard Lohse believes the *Deus absconditus* is Luther’s greatest contribution to the Christian theology of God.<sup>1</sup> Luther’s most well-known, and early, portrayals of the hidden God are in the crucifixion of Christ in the *Heidelberg Disputation* and the unknowable will of God in *The Bondage of the Will*. However, Luther’s later writings on the *Deus absconditus* most frequently address the God who hides himself from his saints in contradiction to his given revelation of himself, in order to cause faith to become true faith.<sup>2</sup> His strong experiential theology brings to light a perplexing problem on the nature of God and his relation to his saints, and offers timeless wisdom for those who have found themselves confronted by the hidden God.

Luther, in typical fashion, scatters his theology of the hidden God throughout his extensive writings. His perspective is ever in flux in accordance with his current topic of address. In such circumstances, it is difficult, if not impossible to portray a single, comprehensive summary of who Luther believes the hidden God to be. Richard A. Muller offers an attempt at defining the *Deus absconditus*, but still falls short of Luther’s complex theology:

The paradox of God’s unknowability and self-manifestations as stated by Luther. The issue is not that God has been hidden and has now revealed himself, but rather that the revelation that has been given to man defies the wisdom of the world because it is the revelation of the hidden God. God is revealed in hiddenness and hidden in his revelation. He reveals himself paradoxically to thwart the proud, under the opposite, omnipotence manifest on the cross.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, ed. and trans. by Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 217.

<sup>2</sup> In order to highlight this, the dates of composition will be given with each reference to Luther’s sources.

<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 90.

This definition conveys the direction most scholars tend to take when discussing Luther's theology of the hiddenness of God: the God who is beyond human comprehension and the God who is revealed in the crucified Christ. A third aspect mentioned only in passing by scholars is the aspect this paper will address: the God who hides himself under his opposite in order to test a believer's faith.<sup>4</sup> The first two aspects will be summarized before the third can be addressed in full, in order that none of Luther's theology of the *Deus absconditus* is neglected.

The God of the Christian faith is hidden from fallen humanity, both in his essence and in his acts toward them. Luther emphasizes from his earliest writings that God dwells in unapproachable light, which to the limited understanding of humans is a profound darkness that no intellect can penetrate—he is “hidden and beyond understanding.”<sup>5</sup> “As I have often said, God in His essence is incomprehensible and dwells in a light which we cannot approach even with our thoughts (cf. 1 Tim 6:16) and to want to inquire into His judgments is truly to strive for things that are impossible.”<sup>6</sup> To search out the unknown God beyond his revelation is to fall into the same sin as Lucifer, Adam and Eve; therefore all speculation regarding his undisclosed nature must cease.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. by Robert C. Schulz (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1963), 277, notes that Luther's concept of the hidden God differs entirely between the christology of the *Heidelberg Disputation* and the issue of God's contradictory will in *The Bondage of the Will*. While he makes the correlation from the suffering of Christ to the suffering of the believer, he does not address Luther's extensive teachings on the experiential hiddenness of God to the believer except in passing (pp. 33, 56-60.). Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 215-218, exhibits the same fascination with the *Heidelberg Disputation* and *The Bondage of the Will* while neglecting Luther's *Deus absconditus* in his other writings, particularly in his lectures on Genesis. It is precisely because Luther's theology is not systematic and ever in flux that the entirety of his writings on the *Deus absconditus* needs to be taken into account, not just what is found in a few, early theological documents.

<sup>5</sup> *Luther's Works* 10:118 (1514); 28:377 (1534).

<sup>6</sup> *LW* 3:138, 139 (1539).

<sup>7</sup> *LW* 3:139 (1539); 4:371 (1539); 5:42, 44 (1542); 28:377 (1534); Jared Wicks, *Luther and His Spiritual Legacy* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983), 65, observes that the young Luther rated highly the negative way of the mystics, whose reverent silence better befitted the unknown God than academic speculation. (See *LW* 10:118 (1514) in which he approves the approach of Pseudo-Dionysius.) However, while he would always affirm silent awe of the hidden God, Luther later rejected the mystical approach of denial, claiming the teachings of Dionysius and the German Mystic Thomas Muntzer were spiritually detrimental to him. Hence he turned to Christ as the revelation of the hidden God.

“‘Let Me be hidden where I have not revealed Myself to you,’ says God, ‘or you will be the cause of your own destruction, just as Adam fell in a horrible manner; for he who investigates My majesty will be overwhelmed by My glory.’”<sup>8</sup> Luther particularly emphasizes the unknowable, hidden will of God in reference to the subject of predestination, as is shown in *The Bondage of the Will* (1525). Here Luther makes a distinction between God preached in the Word and God hidden in his essence. God does many things beyond his self-disclosure in his Word, and though his damnation of many may seem contradictory to his desire to save all as expressed in his Word, it is his divine prerogative and his hidden will must not be questioned.<sup>9</sup>

Not only is the nature of God impenetrable by human intellect, but God also deliberately hides himself from the proud and the ungodly. Luther says of the papists who rely on their own merits rather than on the grace of God: “This is the wrath of God, that He hides Himself, and He does so when He takes His Word and grace away and leaves us with our endeavors and plans. . . . This is how it will go with [the ungodly].”<sup>10</sup> God hides his face from sinners until they fear him, believe him, and treat him as holy.<sup>11</sup> Christ conceals his Godhead from those who believe only in his humanity in order to condemn them.<sup>12</sup> For those “impure and perverted lovers” who praise only the tangible goodness of God, God hides his face and withdraws his goodness, thus revealing the shallowness of their praise and the falseness of their faith.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> LW 5:44 (1542).

<sup>9</sup> LW 33:138ff (1525); cf. 5:42 (1542).

<sup>10</sup> LW 17:278-279 (1528).

<sup>11</sup> LW 16:93 (1528).

<sup>12</sup> LW 10:445 (1514).

<sup>13</sup> LW 21:309 (1521).

Though fallen flesh prevents humans from seeing or knowing God in his essence, God mercifully cloaked his glorious divinity in human flesh, and paradoxically reveals himself in the hiddenness of his divinity through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. “He did not want to give us His divinity unconcealed; this was impossible. For God said (Ex 33:20): ‘Man shall not see Me and live.’ Therefore it was necessary for God to hide, cover, and conceal Himself, thus enabling us to touch and apprehend Him.” Christ is God himself; therefore to see and touch Christ is to see and touch God in him, hidden yet revealed.<sup>14</sup> Luther was adamant that if one believes in the revealed God, Jesus Christ, Christ will “gradually also reveal the hidden God; for ‘He who sees Me also sees the Father.’”<sup>15</sup> Christ desires to reveal God, and those who cling in faith to him who is the revealed God will then not only understand but also have the hidden God.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, those who wish to inquire into the hidden God should instead turn their attention to the God who has both hidden and revealed himself in Christ, and seek him there alone.<sup>17</sup>

In the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), Luther contrasts the theology of glory, which seeks God only in his glory and victory, with the theology of the cross, which knows God in his suffering and humiliation on the cross. Because God chose to reveal himself in the incarnation of Christ, God then “wished to be recognized in suffering.” Luther emphasized, “He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering” and does not deserve to be called a

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<sup>14</sup> LW 23:104 (1530); cf. LW 41:171 (1539); Exodus 33:20, along with Isa 45:15 and 1 Tim 6:26, form the scriptural basis for Luther’s teaching on the hidden God.

<sup>15</sup> LW 5:46 (1542).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> LW 28:126 (1534); Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. by R.A. Wilson (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1964), 240, summarizes this complex theology: “The contradiction between the two statements, the one that the revealed God himself is the hidden God, and the other that the revealed God is distinguished from the hidden God, is resolved by the fact that in order that God may truly be God Luther maintains to the utmost degree the contradiction between God in Jesus Christ and the God of omnipotence and omniscience, between faith and experience.”

theologian. God paradoxically reveals himself by hiding himself in the suffering, crucified Christ, in order to make foolish the wisdom of the world which would seek him only in his glory. In the strongest possible terms, Luther stated, “God can be found only in suffering and the cross.”<sup>18</sup>

As the hidden God cannot be known apart from the sufferings of Christ, Luther strongly believed that those who adhere to Christ in faith cannot know God apart from personal suffering.<sup>19</sup> God’s delight in contradicting the wisdom of the world by hiding his love under wrath, his glory under suffering, and his divinity under flesh is extended to the experience of the believer. Therefore, the person of faith must learn to believe and trust in a God who appears to contradict his promises and revealed nature by hiding himself behind mental and physical suffering. It is this aspect of the hidden God that Luther personally experienced throughout his life and addressed most extensively in his later writings.

Luther’s mental and emotional duress during his early years is well known, for it was one of the factors that drove him to his Reformation theology. He suffered periodic attacks of terror, which he called *Anfechtungen*, or “spiritual temptations.”<sup>20</sup> In Luther’s own words, these terrors

were so great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them. . . . In such a situation, God appears terribly angry, along with all creation. At such a time, there is no flight, no comfort—inside or out—only accusation of everything. . . . All that remains is the stark-naked desire for help and a terrible groaning, but [the soul] does not know where to turn for help. . . . Nor is every corner in the soul not filled with the greatest bitterness, with dread, trembling, and sorrow.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> LW 31:52 (1518).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995), 1, describes the content of Luther’s terror as “an unnerving and enervating fear that God had turned his back on him once and for all, had repudiated his repentance and prayers, and had abandoned him to suffer the pains of hell. Luther felt alone in the universe. . . . He doubted his own faith, his own mission, and the goodness of God. . . . No prayer he uttered could penetrate the wall of indifferent silence with which God had surrounded himself. Condemned by his own conscience, Luther despised himself and murmured against God.”

<sup>21</sup> Timothy J. Wengert, “‘Peace, Peace . . . Cross, Cross’: Reflections on How Martin Luther Relates the Theology of the Cross to Suffering” *Theology Today* 59 (Summer, 2002), 195, quoting Luther, LW 31:129-130.

During his monastic years, the misery of these terrors caused Luther to practice extreme asceticism in order to pacify this God of wrath and darkness.<sup>22</sup> Yet while Luther's comprehension of the gospel of grace and faith removed the need for such discipline and offered an intellectual assurance of salvation, the startling thing is that Luther continued to experience these dreadful depressions for the rest of his life.<sup>23</sup> Luther's friend and fellow Reformer Philip Melancthon often watched him retreat to his room under a terror of God so great that he was often at the point of death.<sup>24</sup> In these times Luther still believed the withdrawn, wrathful person he experienced was God, but God now hidden "under the form of the worst devil."<sup>25</sup>

Along with spiritual anguish, Martin Luther was no stranger to physical suffering. He witnessed the Black Death decimate Wittenberg in the late 1520s and again in 1542.<sup>26</sup> His extreme physical discipline during his monastic years so crippled his health that he suffered the rest of his life, with a severe gall bladder attack in 1537.<sup>27</sup> The premature death of three of his children in 1528, 1542, and 1546 nearly shattered his faith.<sup>28</sup> Finally, Luther experienced persecution from the papists for much of his life. After his excommunication at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther was threatened with death and hidden at Wartburg castle, where he had his

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<sup>22</sup> E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation From a New Perspective*, (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 150ff.

<sup>23</sup> Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Carter Lindberg, ed., *The Reformation Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Modern Period* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002), 59; *LW* 7:7 (1545); cf. 6:259 (1543); 47:209 (1543).

<sup>26</sup> Ronald Rittgers, "The Reformation of Suffering" *Crux* 38:4 (Winter, 2002): 17.

<sup>27</sup> Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 580.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 599; Rittgers, "The Reformation of Suffering," 17.

most severe *Anfechtungen*.<sup>29</sup> Though Luther was not imprisoned or martyred like some of his fellow Reformationists, his freedom was tenuous and society around him tumultuous.<sup>30</sup> His sermon on suffering in 1530 and his commentary on Genesis in 1542 make mention of persecution from papists and the threat of invasion from the Turks, and address the fears of Luther and his followers that God had hidden himself and abandoned them.<sup>31</sup> It is during the midst of these trials, from the mid-1530s until Luther's death in 1546, that his theology of the hidden God moves almost exclusively from a theology of an incomprehensible God and an incarnate God to a God who hides himself from the believer in both senses and suffering.

Martin Luther's theology is highly experiential, and it is from his personal experiences that he developed his theology of the *Deus absconditus*. Indeed, Luther himself said, "I did not learn my theology all at once. I had to brood and ponder over it with increasing depth. My temptations have led me to my theology, for one learns only by experience."<sup>32</sup> Luther's *Anfechtungen* and physical sufferings mentioned above are all evident in the way Luther views the hidden God. While the Word conveys a God of love, faithfulness, and goodness, Luther experienced instead a God of wrath, rejection, and suffering. Luther did not wish to invalidate his experience, but sought instead to understand how it fit within the revelation of God given in Christ and the Word. As mentioned previously, he saw the paradox of God hidden in flesh, that he chose to reveal himself in suffering to counter the wisdom of the world. Luther understood God to act in the same manner toward his saints: hiding himself under internal and external suffering in order to counter human expectations and to cause faith to become true faith. In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther

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<sup>29</sup> Hillerbrand, *Christendom Divided*, 29-30.

<sup>30</sup> Hillerbrand, *The Reformation*, 377.

<sup>31</sup> LW 51:203 (1530); 6:146 (1542).

<sup>32</sup> Hillerbrand, *Christendom Divided*, 30.

reasoned, “Faith has to do with things not seen [Heb 11:1]. Hence in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden. It cannot, however, be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it.”<sup>33</sup> This is the foundation of Luther’s theology of the *Deus absconditus*. In order to compel the believer to trust in God in spite of all reason and sense, God hides himself under everything that is contrary to his nature, even “under the form of the worst devil.”<sup>34</sup>

For Luther, the God of love frequently disguises himself as the God of wrath. In his lectures on Genesis, Luther retells the account of Joseph’s wrathful treatment of his brothers in order to test their character, before unveiling himself as their benevolent brother. He views this story as analogous to God’s dealings with his saints. In order to test and humble them, God hides his true face of “life, glory, salvation, joy, and peace” under the mask of “wrath, death, and hell.” He “afflicts the godly and conceals the fact that He is our God and Father and rather conducts Himself as a tyrant and judge who wants to torture and destroy us.”<sup>35</sup> Luther does not specify here whether this wrathful affliction takes the form of internal condemnation or external tribulation. Rittgers notes that Luther held true suffering could take any form of trial or *Anfechtung* as long as God was the instigator.<sup>36</sup> For Luther, the point is that “reason despairs”, the “will murmurs” and

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<sup>33</sup> LW 33:62 (1526).

<sup>34</sup> LW 7:175 (1545). Luther continues: “This teaches us that the goodness, mercy, and power of God cannot be grasped by speculation but must be understood on the basis of experience.”

<sup>35</sup> LW 8:4, 31 (1545); cf. LW 4:324 (1539).

<sup>36</sup> Rittgers, “The Reformation of Suffering,” 19.

the senses “are completely downcast.”<sup>37</sup> The fallen flesh is crushed in order for the redeemed spirit to conquer and persevere in true faith in spite of all evidence to the contrary.<sup>38</sup>

A second contradictory manner in which our faithful God hides himself is in his apparent rejection of his children. Unlike his ambiguous description of the believer’s experience of the wrath of God, Luther consistently places the rejection of God in the experience of persecution. As an example of this, Luther expounds the story of Jacob’s wrestling with the angel, whom Luther understood to be God himself.<sup>39</sup> In the same manner, God wrestles with the church, conducting himself like an “enemy who wishes to forsake, cast away, and indeed destroy her” through the persecution he allows her to face. In such a time it appears that God has completely forsaken the church, “because He is hidden to [them]” and has abandoned them to their persecutors.<sup>40</sup> Luther gives some context to these persecutions when he condemns the Pope’s slaughtering of the Reformers, whom Luther considered to be the true church, during the 1530s and 1540s. At the same time, invasion by the brutal Turks was a constant threat that struck fear into the hearts of Luther’s audience.<sup>41</sup> The primary question on their minds was, “Where is Christ? Where is our God?”<sup>42</sup> Luther’s response was that God was still present, but it is his custom to “pretend that He is quite alienated from us.” Luther likened God to a father who hides from his children in a game of hide-and-seek, which at this period in his life was a game Luther had no doubt played with his own children. Such a game “pains us immeasurably, since we do not understand it. . . . [But] He

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<sup>37</sup> LW 8:8 (1545).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>39</sup> Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 161.

<sup>40</sup> LW 6:147-148 (1542).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Hillerbrand, *Christendom Divided*, 149-153 and Hillerbrand, *The Reformation*, 376-378.

<sup>42</sup> LW 4:357-358 (1539).

hides himself and disguises himself so that he may test us to see whether we will remain firm in faith and love toward him.”<sup>43</sup>

Finally, Luther believed that the God of goodness hides himself in suffering. The proof-text he uses to demonstrate this is Song of Songs 2:9: “Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in through the windows.” Luther explicates this verse as God standing “hidden among the sufferings which would separate us from him like a wall.”<sup>44</sup> As noted above, Luther experienced great physical illness, sometimes to the point of death, in the final two decades of his life.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, physical suffering was of great importance to Luther. Rittgers notes: “Luther’s God was the suffering God, revealed through the agony of the cross, and, significantly, also through human suffering. . . . one encountered the suffering God through one’s own suffering.”<sup>46</sup> As not only the reason and senses but also the body is battered, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand the will of God in allowing physical pain.<sup>47</sup> But Luther understood suffering to be the colors of the court of Christ, and to suffer is to identify with Christ, hidden though he may be.<sup>48</sup>

Martin Luther identifies two primary objectives which God seeks to accomplish by hiding himself from the believer through condemnation, persecution and suffering. The first objective is God’s fatherly desire to chastise and discipline his children. His affliction of his saints is neither to condemn nor reject them, as would be the case for unbelievers, but to cleanse their nature of the sin that still clings, godly though they may be. Luther understood that “sin is not purged away

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<sup>43</sup> *LW* 6:259 (1543); 47:209 (1543).

<sup>44</sup> *LW* 44:28 (1520); note *LW* 47:209 (1543) and 6:359 (1543) where he uses the same analogy 23 years later for the same purpose.

<sup>45</sup> Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 748.

<sup>46</sup> Rittgers, “The Reformation of Suffering,” 19.

<sup>47</sup> *LW* 8:8 (1545).

<sup>48</sup> *LW* 51:199 (1530); 4:358 (1539).

without pain” and there is no greater pain than the perplexity that comes when God acts in opposition to his known nature.<sup>49</sup> Luther himself acted out this theology, for it is recorded that he once forbade his son Hans from seeing his father for three days as punishment for disobedience.<sup>50</sup> Yet Luther would say that “all God’s chastisements are graciously designed to be a blessed comfort” because of the purgation of sin, and it was his express desire to help his readers gain the same perspective.<sup>51</sup>

The second and primary purpose Luther understood for the hiddenness of God is to cause faith to become true faith. As Althaus notes, “God’s hiddenness and man’s faith belong together.”<sup>52</sup> Luther says, “If, then, I could by any means comprehend how this God can be merciful and just who displays so much wrath and iniquity, there would be no need of faith. As it is, since that cannot be comprehended, there is room for the exercise of faith.”<sup>53</sup> Luther believed the highest stage of faith is reached when one perseveres not only through physical sufferings but also through severe condemnation of the conscience—Luther’s *Anfechtungen*. God’s hiddenness forces the believer to follow God without evidence of his goodness, even with evidence to the contrary. This “mortifies” the senses, flesh, and reason, and causes one to trust the promises of God “with simplicity and with eyes shut.”<sup>54</sup> And it is not without benefit. “To believe at such

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<sup>49</sup> LW 8:5, 8-9 (1545); 47:209 (1543).

<sup>50</sup> Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 596.

<sup>51</sup> LW 14:142 (1517).

<sup>52</sup> Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 56.

<sup>53</sup> LW 33:62 (1526).

<sup>54</sup> LW 6:359 (1543).

times that God is gracious and well-disposed toward us is the greatest work that may ever happen to and in a man.”<sup>55</sup>

Throughout his writings on the hidden God, Luther offers pastoral advice on how one should respond when confronted with the hiddenness of God. First, one should not seek God apart from his revelation of himself, but turn instead to the means by which he has revealed himself: in Christ, the Word and the sacraments.<sup>56</sup> Luther advises that the believer should look to Christ, God incarnate, for that is how God has chosen to reveal himself.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, one must not speculate about the nature or will of God but look to how he has been “clothed and set forth in the Word.”<sup>58</sup> Finally, God has graciously revealed himself in the sacraments, and the believer should receive this tangible revelation with thanksgiving and reverence.<sup>59</sup>

Second, one must stand firm on the truths and promises God has given us in his Word in spite of all contradictory feelings or experiences. In the Word is an “extraordinary and divine power, which you will experience if you cling to it with a firm faith.”<sup>60</sup> As Abraham held to the promise of descendants in spite of his age so the believer must hold to the promises of God’s goodness in the Word even when faced by circumstances to the contrary.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *LW* 44:29 (1520); 21:309 (1521).

<sup>56</sup> *LW* 3:139 (1539); 4:371 (1539); 5:42 (1542)

<sup>57</sup> *LW* 33:145 (1526); 5:45-45 (1542); 28:124 (1534); 23:104 (1531); 31:52 (1518).

<sup>58</sup> *LW* 33:139 (1526); 3:138 (1539); 4:371 (1539); 6:146 (1542); 7:49 (1545).

<sup>59</sup> *LW* 41:171 (1539); 6:146 (1542).

<sup>60</sup> *LW* 4:358 (1539); 30:267 (1527).

<sup>61</sup> *LW* 4:324 (1539); 6:259 (1542); 7:49 (1545): Luther draws the same analogy from the story of Joseph’s adherence to the promises given him in spite of his slavery and imprisonment.

Third, and most importantly, one must persevere in faith, clinging to a contradictory God until he chooses to remain hidden no longer.<sup>62</sup> Faith is needed to force through the coverings that cloud the believer's vision of God.<sup>63</sup> One must "believe things that are invisible, hope for things that are delayed, and love God—even if He shows Himself unfriendly and opposed to you—and thus persevere until the end."<sup>64</sup> Luther makes this most clear from the account of Jacob's wrestling with God: when God hides his face, if one perseveres, God is overcome. Luther views God as saying, "You have been subjected to discipline long enough and frequently enough, and I have often hidden My face from you. But because you have clung to the promise so firmly, I have been compelled to yield to you, to hear you, and to help you."<sup>65</sup>

The question remains whether Luther viewed this hiddenness of God as his essence and act, or whether it is due rather to the fallen and limited perspective of redeemed humanity. In 1527 Luther did write, "God does not withdraw Himself from us; but the world, the flesh, and the devil weaken us and thus prevent us from seeing God."<sup>66</sup> Is this statement a contradiction to every one of his other descriptions of the God who deliberately hides himself from the godly? Not necessarily. God in his essence and act toward the believer is love, not wrath, benevolence, not condemnation. Luther makes clear that these negative appearances of God are only "masks" under which he hides and are not his inherent nature. The fact remains, though, that Luther clearly believes God purposefully chooses to hide behind every evil appearance, and it is not just that fallen flesh prevents us from seeing him in full. Yet it is because of fallen flesh that he then

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<sup>62</sup> *LW* 7:49 (1545); 8:30 (1545).

<sup>63</sup> *LW* 30:267 (1527).

<sup>64</sup> *LW* 4:324 (1539).

<sup>65</sup> *LW* 6:259 (1543).

<sup>66</sup> *LW* 30:267 (1527).

chooses to hide himself. Luther strongly held that the taint of sin is still present in the elect, and the benevolence of God is what moves him to hide himself in order to purify the believer from sin and strengthen the believer's faith. The person who hides under a mask is still present, even though he is hidden. Like Job, the believer who is confronted by the malevolent hiddenness of God and who has no indication of any specific sin that causes such separation must persevere in faith, clinging to the promises and revelation given in the Word and Christ of God's goodness and love. The believer can take comfort in the fact that this is God's purposeful intention, that the believer's faith might be strengthened beyond any other means, and that once purification is complete, the mask will be removed and God will reveal himself once again. For as Luther strongly believed, and experientially discovered, "In perseverance in prayer and faith God becomes a visible God from a hidden God."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *LW* 6:259 (1543).

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