

COMPANIONS
in the
DARKNESS

SEVEN SAINTS
WHO STRUGGLED
WITH DEPRESSION
AND DOUBT

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InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Companions in the Darkness* by Diana Gruver.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.

MARTIN LUTHER

Flee Solitude—Drink, Joke, and Jest

An ebony stain followed in the wake of his jerking arm movements across the page. Words poured from him. Dark ink flung at dark thoughts, keeping them at bay, feeding faith's flame.

What if your doctrine is false and in error? What if all this havoc is for naught? All you have unearthed is violence and contention.

The thoughts circled him like a hungry dog cornering its prey, eager to sink its teeth fatally through soft flesh. He met them with more ferocious scribbling with his pen.

The torment continued. He could feel the sweat beading on his face. He could smell its sour scent. It threatened to drip on the page of his letter to his friend Philip as he wrote, "I do not wish you to worry about me at all. As regards my person, everything is well, except that my mental trouble has not ceased and my former infirmity of spirit and of faith continues."¹

The old plague had returned. The doubts, the questions, the fear. He heard the words of his old mentor in his mind. *Look to the wounds of Christ, Martin. Look at the blood pouring from his broken body.*

His voice echoed in the small, wood-paneled room. "Devil, my cause is grounded in the Gospel, the Gospel God has given me. Talk to him about it. He has commanded me to listen to Christ."²

It was in the name of Christ he had started. Christ would not abandon him.

But here he was, locked away in this exile, this wilderness, nestled up on this hill with the birds.

*I am here with nothing to do, like a free man among captives.*³

He glanced at the Greek New Testament on his writing table. He had nothing to do but write. Nothing to do but wrestle with Greek verbs. He would translate the New Testament. He would fill the emptiness of his tiny rooms with the Word of God. He would give the Word to the people in a language they could understand.

He pressed a hand to his stomach as nausea rose inside. His abdomen was hard and unyielding. The attacks came not only to his mind but to his body as well. Would neither of them subside?

*“I did not sleep all night, and still have no peace. Please pray for me, for this malady will become unbearable, if it goes on as it has begun.”*⁴

*“I am growing sluggish and languid and cold in spirit, and am miserable. Until to-day I have been constipated for six days.”*⁵

Perhaps he would die here. Alone. In agony.

They’d brought him here for safety, and he had willingly played the part, growing out the tonsure on the top of his head and adding a beard. He’d taken on the persona of a knight—Knight George—though a strange knight surely, for he spent so much time sequestered in his rooms, writing and studying.

As he gazed down at the town below, secluded, reclusive, he wondered when this exile would end. Safety had become a prison.

*“I would rather burn in live coals than rot here alone, half-alive and yet not dead.”*⁶

CHRIST THE HANGMAN: DARK DAYS IN THE MONASTERY

By the time Martin Luther found himself sequestered in Wartburg Castle, he had sparked the religious movement we’ve now come to know as the Protestant Reformation. But in the years before the Reformation, before the councils and debates and disputations, Martin Luther was a monk.

It all started on a summer day as Luther was riding home from the University of Erfurt, where he was studying for a career in law. A thunderstorm caught him out in the open, terrifying him with explosions of thunder and lightning. He cowered on the ground, certain of death, and made a vow that would change his life: “St. Anne, save me, and I will become a monk!” He survived the storm and kept his vow. Within weeks he quit school, sold his books, and entered an Augustinian monastery. His father was furious at this “waste” of his education.

Once in the monastery, he threw himself into the religious life. He would later say, “I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I.”⁷ But he wasn’t living the life of a peaceful contemplative. Rather, he went through his days under the shadow of desperation and fear, obsessed with living a holy life, petrified of God’s judgment. He constantly doubted God’s love and despaired of any hope of salvation. As he nitpicked his sins and heaped extreme forms of penance on himself, Luther was convinced his soul was damned: “I lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made him the jailer and hangman of my poor soul.”⁸

The first time Luther presided over the Mass, he feared God would strike him dead on the spot. Feeling his anxious frame trembling, he clung to the altar for support. Legend has it his hands shook so badly that he nearly spilled the Eucharistic wine.

In the midst of this turmoil, Luther’s beloved confessor, mentor, and friend, Johann von Staupitz, gave him a Bible and pointed his eyes away from his own unworthiness to Jesus on the cross. In response to Luther’s crippling fears, to his guilt and feelings of never measuring up, to the penance and punishment he derived for himself, to his visions of Christ only as a judge ready to smite him, Staupitz had a clear, resounding refrain: “Look to the wounds of Christ.”

As Luther studied the Bible, first as a doctoral student and then as a professor in Wittenberg, and as he continued to follow Staupitz’s

advice, his picture of God began to shift. Instead of an angry, judgment-hungry God, peering down from heaven, ready for any excuse to strike him dead, Luther saw God as Father, freely offering forgiveness through faith by grace. Working through his despair led him to a new understanding of the gospel—the God who is for us, seen in Jesus Christ on the cross, who took on our pain and our sin to make us his children. This reclaimed gospel message was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation.

Luther called the inner turmoil and depressive angst he experienced *anfechtung*. Throughout his life, he continued to use this word to describe the terror, despair, and fear of religious crises and trials. These moments were battles for faith for him—battles to hold fast to the truth that God had not forsaken him, that he was no longer under condemnation because of Christ. They were battles to hold fast to the Word of God.

Luther's term *anfechtung* is much broader than what we call depression today, so they aren't fully synonymous terms, but they are related. They both bring the same swirling thoughts, the same internal terror. They both plague us with questions of our worthiness, of our guilt, of whether we are deserving of love. Both can make us doubt God's goodness and wonder if we can slip beyond his grace.

So in the midst of depression, when we fall under the harassment of guilt and shame, we can follow Staupitz's advice as well. *Look to the wounds of Christ*. For this is where we see the extent of God's love, the upside-down way he brings beauty and wholeness, the full measure of his grace. It is where we are reminded of truth outside of our feelings—that nothing can separate us from God's love, not even the deepest depression. Luther's life tells us this: the wounds of Christ will guide us through the darkness.

As I look back now, I realize that my seasons of depression solidified my understanding of the gospel more than any other experience in my life. God met me in the place where I felt furthest from him, and he wove strength into a message I'd heard since I was a

child. I was desperate, helpless, and broken. I needed something bigger than my pain, something strong enough to bear the suffocating weight of it. I needed hope that my pain was not the end of the story. In that darkness, I was showered with a message of grace, which told the tale of One who came to me in my brokenness and offered redemption. The gospel gave me space to be “not okay” because it expected I would come needy. It offered a message of a Savior who not only offered salvation for my soul but who promised to radically remake and transform all of creation, eradicating sorrow and sickness—even faulty brain chemistry. This hope was something I could look to as truth, even as I struggled to know which of my own thoughts could be trusted. In the midst of my darkness, it became my only place of sure footing.

This does not mean that focusing on the gospel will cure our depression. It didn’t for Luther, even as his theology shifted with the Reformation. Anxiety and depression would continue to afflict him for the rest of his life, and he would return to the message of the cross again and again as an antidote for his feelings of hopelessness and guilt. But his depression did become a training ground for him. He would say later that he didn’t learn his theology all at once, and that his “spiritual trials” (*anfechtung*) helped him in the process.⁹ He started as a depressed monk, poring over Scripture in his desperation, but as he “looked to the wounds of Christ,” a light of hope slowly dawned. The spiritual darkness of one man gave birth to a new understanding of the gospel, one that transformed him and would shake the foundations of Western Christianity.

REFORMATION BEGINNINGS AND ANGUISH AT WARTBURG

Luther’s shifting theology soon became a matter of public debate after he issued his Ninety-Five Theses. (It’s worth noting that there is some scholarly debate about how fully formed Luther’s reformation theology was at that point.) The Ninety-Five Theses were the academic result of Luther’s pastoral concern over the selling of

indulgences, a practice he saw devolving into a scam that abused the laypeople. His words spread quickly and widely because of the newly developed Gutenberg printing press, and the results were far more explosive than he likely intended. He'd wanted a scholarly debate. Instead he received public scrutiny and church discipline. He'd wanted reform. Instead he was facing a complete break from the church he loved and had surrendered his life to.

What followed was a rapid series of councils—with his monastic order, with church officials, with German officials—and lots of written arguments from all sides about his views. When Luther refused to recant or withdraw his previous writings, the pope excommunicated him from the church.

It all culminated in the Diet of Worms, where Luther was brought before political leaders and put on trial for heresy. His life was at risk. He would not have been the first rebel burned at the stake for his revolutionary views. Luther bravely held his ground, refusing to recant unless someone could prove from Scripture that he was wrong. The Edict of Worms that followed made him an outlaw and his writings illegal. It was a crime to offer Luther food and shelter, and he was to be captured, even if he was killed in the process.

It was on the way home from this Diet of Worms, under the shadow of this Edict, that Luther was kidnapped by friends, with the help of a supportive local political figure, Elector Frederick the Wise, and hidden in Wartburg Castle. No one knew of his whereabouts. Some assumed he was dead.

There he sat for ten months. Excommunicated from the church. A fugitive. Under threat of death. With an exploding religious movement under his care. All within four years of his first call for debate over the Ninety-Five Theses. All before his fortieth birthday.

It's enough to make my head spin.

It's no wonder Luther speaks of emotional, mental, and spiritual trials while he's in Wartburg Castle. He was stricken by health problems that brought physical agony. He was isolated and lonely, cut off from

his closest friends during a volatile season, begging them to write, wary of revealing his location. He once again battled the *anfechtung* of the monastery, once again fought his “infirmity of spirit and of faith.”

In spite of these struggles, Luther’s productivity was superhuman. During his time in Wartburg, he wrote several pamphlets explaining and defending the Reformation, and he translated the entire New Testament into German in a matter of weeks.

Some point to this unbelievable productivity and claim there’s no way Luther could have been depressed. Others point to it as evidence that he was “throwing ink at the Devil”¹⁰ as a means to keep his dark and morbid thoughts at bay. When I read Luther’s own words, I can’t help but believe it’s the latter.¹¹

THE DEVIL LIES IN WAIT FOR YOU

Luther’s understanding of the devil’s role in the world is worth noting here. It’s particularly important in light of how depression has been overspiritualized and treated poorly at times.

In Luther’s view, the world was awash with spiritual forces at work behind the scenes, and the devil was constantly wreaking havoc. It should come as no surprise, then, that he understood the source of his (and others’) depressions to be the devil himself.¹² This did not put mental illness in a special category though, as he understood the devil to be responsible for all illnesses and mishaps—even a stubbed toe. Depression and other mental illnesses were no different. Luther said of suicide, “Tis the devil who has put the cord round their necks, or the knife to their throats.”¹³ He considered solitude particularly dangerous for people struggling with depression because it gives more space for the devil to “wriggle in” with his arsenal of dark thoughts, hopelessness, temptation, and lies. Scripture tells us that our enemy, the devil, seeks to “steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10), and in this sense, even coming from a modern, Western worldview, we can recognize his delight in seeing us robbed of pleasure, dead in spirit, and possibly destroying our bodies.

So when you read about Luther attributing depression to the devil or including fighting the devil as part of his suggested cure, view his words in light of his worldview as a whole. He fought the devil when he was melancholy because in his understanding that was getting to the source. And, again, he was just as quick to talk about fighting the devil in the midst of his other health ailments. He knew all of these trials could distract from the freedom and comfort of the gospel, so he fought back. I'll let you do your own reading on all Luther has to say about combating the devil (be prepared for some lively commentary). In short, he armed himself with Scripture, sang music, and mocked the devil, focusing on the devil's impotence in the face of Christ's victory. And he looked to the hope and comfort of Christ, our victor, our gracious Lord.

Luther learned this battle in his monastery days as he battled his *anfechtungen*, and he engaged in it again in Wartburg as he furiously wrote and translated. It's the tactic he took every time the clutches of despair grasped at his mind.

STRENGTH SOON DEJECTED: LUTHER'S ILLNESSES

After ten months of exile, Luther left Wartburg Castle and returned to Wittenberg to give leadership to the growing Reformation movement. It was a dangerous decision, as nothing had changed legally since he went into hiding, but the extreme and violent interpretations of his views that were emerging demanded urgent attention. Once settled again in Wittenberg, Luther set to work organizing the Protestant churches. He wrote a simpler liturgy in German for use in worship and a *Large Catechism* and *Small Catechism* for teaching and prayer. He also clarified the role of the sacraments and reduced them from seven to two: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

In addition, much to the surprise of his friends, Luther married suddenly at the age of forty-one. His wife, Katharina von Bora, had escaped from a convent a few years earlier by hiding in old fish barrels. From what we know of Katie Luther, she was feisty, a

firestorm of productivity, and possessed a stubborn streak to match her husband's. Katie and Martin Luther would have six children together. By all accounts, they came to deeply love each other and shared a happy marriage.

For a wedding present, they were given the Black Cloister in Wittenberg. It was the same Augustinian monastery Luther had lived in before the Reformation began. The halls that once whispered with the prayers and studies of monks became their home, now echoing with the lively conversations of Luther and his students, the prattle of children, and the comings and goings of the growing Reformation.

Throughout this bustling activity of life and ministry, Luther was often a sick man. In addition to extreme constipation, like he had suffered at Wartburg Castle, he developed kidney and bladder stones. The pain from them was so excruciating that he would compare them to death. He experienced a persistent ringing in his ears, vertigo, dizziness, fainting spells, and headaches, which some have suggested was Ménière's disease. He would also develop arthritis, as well as the heart problems that would eventually lead to his death.

After this long list of Luther's physical ailments, I must pause for a brief aside. Luther has received criticism for his extreme and vulgar written attacks against his theological and political opponents. Toward the end of his life, he spoke out extensively against the Jews in what can only be described as despicably anti-Semitic rhetoric. There is no end to the examples of his sharp and irritable tongue. Though it by no means comes close to excusing his behavior, I wonder if the physical and emotional struggle going on behind the scenes served to amplify this part of Luther's personality. Many of us, after all, could tell stories of the emotional toll taken by lingering and unresolved medical problems and the ways that physical and psychological struggles become intertwined.¹⁴ Surely speaking from his own experience, Luther said, "Heavy thoughts bring on physical maladies; when the soul is oppressed, so is the body. . . . When cares,

heavy cogitations, sorrows, and passions superabound, they weaken the body.”¹⁵ The reverse is also true.

We have a good example of this connection of body and spirit in an intense health scare Luther had when he was forty-three years old. His friend Justus Jonas left us a firsthand account of it.¹⁶

Luther had not been well. He excused himself from dinner because of a loud roaring in his ear, but as he reached his bed, he collapsed, though he remained conscious. It’s clear he thought he was dying. He prayed again and again, always concluding, “Thy will be done.” He told God the things he wished he’d been able to do with more time. He said goodbye to Katie and to their son, Hans, entrusting them to God’s keeping, asking them to accept God’s will if he should die. He was sobbing. They were sobbing. It’s heartrending.

Of course, Luther didn’t die then, although he would continue to complain of similar symptoms for the rest of his life. But there was more going on that day than a physical near-death experience. That morning, before his attack, Luther told his friends that he wrestled with a “grave spiritual trial.” Jonas wrote the day after, “To-day the doctor [Luther] said to me: ‘I must make a note of this day; yesterday I was at school.’ He said that his spiritual trial of yesterday was twice as great as this bodily illness which came on in the evening.”¹⁷

Though he spoke of this trial to his friends, we unfortunately aren’t given many details. We do know that it troubled and distressed him greatly. About a month later, he wrote to his friend Philip Melancthon, presumably about the same episode(s):

I was for more than a whole week in death and hell, so that I was sick all over, and my limbs still tremble. I almost lost Christ in the waves and blasts of despair and blasphemy against God, but God was moved by the prayers of the saints [other Christians] and began to take pity on me and rescued my soul from the lowest hell.¹⁸

He wrote to another friend, John Agricola, during this time, saying, Please do not stop comforting me and praying for me, because I am poor and needy. . . . Satan himself rages with his whole might within me, and the Lord has put me in his power like another Job. The devil tempts me with great infirmity of spirit, but through the prayers of the saints I am not left altogether in his hands, although the wounds he gives my heart will be hard to heal.¹⁹

Waves of doubt and heartache washed over him. Whatever the thoughts, whatever the whispers of the darkness, Luther knew that he would continue to bear the marks of his depression during this season. It would take him months to recuperate. He described the period to one of his friends as a time of “restlessness and faintheartedness.”²⁰ Months later he wrote to Melancthon again, “Pray for me, wretched and despised worm that I am, vexed with a spirit of sadness.”²¹

And yet he called this experience “school.” As horrifying as his psychological state was, as much as he would have preferred death to the doubts and fears attacking his mind, Luther found that the experience taught him something. This trial, as with all others, was a school yard, a training ground. He would say elsewhere that trials make us more sure of doctrine, increase our faith, and teach us Scripture’s true meaning.²² It is because of the dark that we learn the nature of the light. This belief did not tritely diminish the dark’s intensity or make light of its pain. But it did train Luther to expect to grow in the midst of trials—and sometimes because of them. This expectation was strong enough that he wrote it down as a reminder in the midst of an intense emotional and spiritual fight: *You are at school.*

It was about this time that Luther wrote his famous hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”²³ He found great power in singing to remind us of the gospel and fight off the attacks of doubt. These resounding words many of us still sing today carry greater weight when I think of the painful physical and emotional fire behind them.

A mighty fortress is our God,
A good mailcoat and weapon;
He sets us free from ev'ry wrong
That wickedness would bring on.
The old knavish foe,
He means earnest now;
Force and cunning sly
His horrid policy,
On earth there's nothing like him.

'Tis all in vain, do what we can,
Our strength is soon dejected.
But he fights for us, the right man,
By God himself elected.
Ask'st thou who is this?
Jesus Christ it is,
Lord of Hosts alone,
And God but him is none,
So he must win the battle.

And the world with devils swarm,
All gaping to devour us,
We will not fear the smallest harm,
Success is yet before us.
The world's prince accurst,
Let him rage his worst,
No hurt brings about;
His doom it is gone out,
One word can overturn him.

The word they must allow to stand,
Nor any thanks have for it;
He is with us, at our right hand,
With all gifts of His spirit.

If they take our life,
Wealth, name, child, and wife—
Let everything go:
They have no profit so;
The kingdom ours remaineth.²⁴

There is a declaration of sure victory in these verses, one that speaks all the more to Luther's faith when we remember he was still caught in the midst of the battle.

FED UP WITH THE WORLD: ACCUMULATING LOSS

There were seasons of Luther's life that were consumed with the normal rhythms of ministry in a revolutionary time. He had his parishioners to care for, his children to play with, his students to teach, letters to write, sermons to preach. Then there were seasons when he was hit hard by an accumulation of trials. Maybe you've experienced seasons like this—those seasons when one sorrow is followed by another.

Several years before his death, Luther's beloved Katie suffered a miscarriage that left her extremely ill—so ill, in fact, that she was unable even to walk for two months.²⁵ I imagine Luther feared he would also have to suffer the loss of his wife.

Two years later, they would lose a precious member of their family: Martin and Katie's thirteen-year-old daughter, Magdalena, who became extremely ill. Luther stayed by her deathbed, comforting her and pleading in prayer. He reminded her of her Father in heaven, of where she was going. Even with her trusting response, he turned from her and said, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. I love her very much. If this flesh is so strong, what must the spirit be?"²⁶

An onlooker described the scene: "When his daughter was in the agony of death, he fell upon his knees before the bed and, weeping bitterly, prayed that God might save her if it be his will. Thus she

gave up the ghost in the arms of her father. Her mother was in the same room but was farther from the bed on account of her grief.”²⁷

Oh, the raw sorrow in this account. Comforting your child as she eases into death, fully aware, old enough to grasp what is happening to her. Comforting your wife as she weeps with loud sobs, trying to say goodbye to her daughter. And in all this, speaking some truth to yourself, trying to remember the Promise in the midst of tears. Magdalena’s death was a heavy emotional blow. The high child-mortality rates of the time did not dull the pain of losing his daughter. Years later, Luther still wrote of mourning and missing her.

Along with these personal trials, Luther’s health continued to decline, and political troubles in Germany escalated. He told a friend, “I am tired, and nothing more is in me.”²⁸

Even this great man, Martin Luther, reached the point of just wanting to be done. He was tired of the pain, tired of the trouble, tired of the sorrow. He was depleted, with nothing left to give. Around this time he told Katie, “I am fed up with the world.”²⁹

Luther would live for almost four more years, continuing on in faithful ministry in spite of his grief and physical pain. By the time he died, he had spun into motion a religious movement that would forever change European—and Christian—history. In his sermons, treatises, letters, and snippets of conversations, he offered fresh interpretations of Scripture. Anyone today who hails from a Protestant tradition has Luther to thank for its existence.

After Luther’s death, a paper was discovered in his room, on which was written his last statement. It was a final testament to his own struggles and to the gospel of grace upon which he’d built his life: “We are beggars. That is true.”³⁰

FIND FRIENDS AND MAKE MERRY

I remember the ache of loneliness and the fear of my own thoughts during the worst of my depression in my college years. I felt cut off from everyone by a thick insulating layer. Others’ voices came as if

from a distance, reflecting off the thick walls around my heart and mind. I was trapped in a cold, isolating fog.

Some nights I would pick up my notebook and textbook—probably one of the thick volumes of Norton’s literature anthology—slowly climb the stairs, and walk to my friends’ apartment, not to talk but just to sit. I craved being in the presence of someone else who was living, breathing, warm, alive. People who cared about me were there, breathing the same air, loving me in the midst of my darkness—and that was enough to keep me going.

At times it felt needy, even pathetic—“just please let me sit in your apartment while you’re there.” But I was unknowingly following one of Luther’s oft-repeated pieces of advice for depression: flee solitude. In seeking out company, I was doing one of the best things I could. Luther would have encouraged me that *this* was fighting.

We have several letters with Luther’s guidance for how to survive depression. My favorite of these letters was written to a young man named Jerome Weller, who studied with Luther, lived in his house, and even tutored his children. Feeling depressed, Jerome feared he would give in to despair and perhaps even commit suicide. Luther wrote to him with his advice:

By all means, flee solitude, for the devil watches and lies in wait for you most of all when you are alone. . . . Therefore, Jerome, joke and play games with my wife and others. In this way you will drive out your diabolical thoughts and take courage. . . .

Be of good courage, therefore, and cast these dreadful thoughts out of your mind. Whenever the devil pesters you with these thoughts, at once seek out the company of men, drink more, joke and jest, or engage in some other form of merriment.³¹

This advice may not be easy to follow. It works against the natural pull of depression to isolate and withdraw. Solitude brought a strange sort of comfort when I was depressed. I didn’t have to act

normal, didn't have to summon the energy to engage, to make eye contact, to smile, to converse. I could simply be, could simply disappear. But Luther would have told me to fight against this inclination. To not only avoid solitude but flee it. To surround myself with friends, to do anything but remain alone.

Luther knew the chilling isolation of solitude. As he sat in his rooms at Wartburg Castle, he wrestled with dark thoughts alone. He understood that, without the diversion, comfort, and delight that friends offer, we become more vulnerable to our own thought progressions: "The worst and saddest things come to mind. We reflect in detail upon all sorts of evils. And if we have encountered adversity in our lives, we dwell upon it as much as possible, magnify it, think that no one is as unhappy as we are, and imagine the worst possible consequences."³²

I find Luther's experience so relatable that it brings a morbid smile to my lips. Just as he describes, I have seen depression feed and escalate my negative thought patterns. All sorts of thoughts and memories come to mind: twisted perceptions of myself or those I love, hurt I thought I'd moved past, lies I thought I'd never believe. They string one after another, leading deeper and deeper down into an abyss of hopelessness and self-loathing and spiraling further and further from reason and reality. Being alone allows us to stay in this prison of our own mind, with little to pull us from it. In solitude, these thoughts become more vicious, more convincing, and, sometimes, more dangerous.

To a woman concerned about her suicidal husband, Luther wrote,

Be very careful not to leave your husband alone for a single moment, and leave nothing lying about with which he might harm himself. Solitude is poison to him. For this reason the devil drives him to it. . . . Whatever you do, do not leave him alone, and be sure that his surroundings are not so quiet that he sinks into his own thoughts. It does not matter if he becomes angry about this.³³

Don't be alone, Luther urges. Go find some company.

What about those moments when there aren't friends close by, when there isn't a safe haven to get to? What if you really are isolated? When Luther found himself in this sort of position, he got creative:

When I am assailed with heavy tribulations, I rush out among my pigs, rather than remain alone by myself. The human heart is like a millstone in a mill . . . if you put no wheat [under it], it still grinds on, but then 'tis itself it grinds and wears away. So the human heart, unless it be occupied with some employment, leaves space for the devil, who wriggles himself in, and brings with him a whole host of evil thoughts, temptations, and tribulations, which grind out the heart.³⁴

If you can't be with your friends, go hang out with your pigs, Luther says. Refuse to be alone. Do not allow your darkened thoughts to continue grinding, spinning, swirling in your mind. Find some warm-blooded being, any sort of companionship, to keep your melancholy feelings at bay.

When our inner being is clouded by depression, untethered and drifting, we can't fully trust our own thoughts or perception of reality. Depression has a way of distorting reality, of cloaking lies as truth. Our friends—in Luther's mind, particularly our fellow Christians—can remind us of truth, of reality, of hope. "It is high time that you cease relying on and pursuing your own thoughts," he wrote to a friend. "Listen to other people who are not subject to this temptation. Give the closest attention to what we say, and let our words penetrate to your heart. Thus God will strengthen and comfort you by means of our words."³⁵

As the voices of our mind quiet in the safe company of our friends and loved ones, we can begin to listen to their words. They can speak back to us the truth about ourselves and the value of our life, about hope for the future, about their love for us. These truths,

and the truth of God's Word, become even more powerful as they enter our ears from their lips. Luther says, "Do not dwell on your own thoughts, but listen to what other people have to say to you. For God has commanded men to comfort their brethren, and it is his will that the afflicted should receive such consolation as God's very own."³⁶

I think of Luther's dearest friends and the letters they exchanged, of the conversations that are lost to history. I think of Staupitz, directing Luther's gaze to the cross. I think of the ways they comforted him when his world went dark, of how they bolstered him up.

I also think of his wife Katie. When he was overcome by worries and fears, she comforted him with the words of Scripture. In the most desperate of cases, she employed the dramatic:

Once, when Martin was so depressed that none of Kate's counsel would help, she put on a black dress. Luther noticed it and asked, "Are you going to a funeral?"

"No," Kate replied, "but since you act as though God is dead, I wanted to join you in your mourning."

Luther got the message and recovered.³⁷

It's clear Luther took his own advice and listened to her as if from God himself. He opened his ears to hear the truth she spoke, and acted on it as best he could. Sometimes this brought relief enough to carry on.

Luther went even further in his advice, though. With the friends (or pigs) we've sought out, he said we should find some sort of merriment. Oh what a challenge—to "joke and jest" when the heart is heavy, the world is dark, thoughts clouded. This also flies in the face of depression's nature, which dims the pleasure of everything. But Luther saw embracing life to its fullest possible means and relishing in its delights as a weapon. He calls us to go be among friends, find something to enjoy that will help you relax, and laugh, even if doing so is the hardest struggle.

Writing to a young prince who suffered from depression, Luther suggested that it would be good for him

to engage in riding and hunting, and to seek the company of others who may be able to rejoice with Your Grace in a godly and honorable way. For solitude and melancholy are poisonous and fatal to all people, and especially to a young man. . . .

Be merry [with your friends at hand]; for gladness and good cheer, when decent and proper, are the best medicine for a young person—indeed, for all people. I myself, who have spent a good part of my life in sorrow and gloom, now seek and find pleasure wherever I can.³⁸

Here we find a better context to hear Luther's recommendation for Jerome to "drink more." He was not suggesting that good old Jerome Weller forget his sorrows through drunkenness. Self-medicating with alcohol or other drugs is dangerous—particularly when you're already suffering with a mental illness. Rather, as the letter above to the prince makes clear, Luther is advocating for good, hearty pleasure. I think he's encouraging both of them to relish the simple, physical pleasures of life that do good for our hearts. He's telling them to find something that will provide joy and enjoyment, something that will keep them grounded in the goodness of life.

Sometimes it may feel impossible to summon the energy to engage in these enjoyable things. Sometimes we may feel like we need to relearn ourselves how to smile. Sometimes we may be simply going through the motions, positioning ourselves in these activities and moments to be ready when a sliver of joy may appear. But whether it's riding and hunting, playing music, laughing and joking with friends, or eating and drinking, we seek some source of delight, some physical means of pulling us from our thoughts and reminding us of the goodness in God's world.

Find laughter. Find the smallest glimmers of joy. And chase them.

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