



A BIBLE STUDY ON LUCAS CRANACH THE ELDER

Artist, businessman and friend of Luther

“THE GOD OF ABRAHAM PRAISE”

(TLH 40; LW 450; LSB 798)

(Ex. 3:6, 14; Ps. 9:7–11; 142:5–6; Rev. 4:8)

The Lord created His people to praise Him with voice, musical instrument and the arts.

Since the Fall, those skilled in music and the fine arts have continually been tempted to find their inspiration in anything but the revealed Word of God. At the dawn of the Reformation, artisans were often at the mercy of rulers and church leaders who wanted themselves and the kingdoms they were building portrayed in the most glorious of ways. Martin Luther's objections to the sale of the forgiveness of sins to fund pretentious church buildings in Rome highlighted the debate on the proper understanding of the role of fine art in the church.

Luther believed music and the fine arts were good gifts from God, redeemed by Christ for service under the Word of God. His partnership with Lucas Cranach, who is referred to as the painter of the Lutheran Reformation, was complicated, but productive (over a thousand paintings were produced by the Cranach studio in Wittenberg). His Wittenberg Altarpiece (1547) and Weimar Altarpiece (completed after his death by his son, Lucas Cranach the Younger in 1555) stand today as witnesses to the Word of God rediscovered by Luther and the Lutheran Reformation. Through faith in Christ, Cranach's use of his God-given artistic talents serves as a great doxology to the Word revealed by the prophets and apostles — in a manner understood by even those unable to pick up and read the Holy Scriptures.

STANZA ONE AND TWO

1 The God of Abr'ham praise, / Who reigns enthroned above; / Ancient of everlasting days / And God of love. / Jehovah, great I AM! / By earth and heaven confessed; / I bow and bless the sacred name / Forever blest.

2 The God of Abr'ham praise, / At whose supreme command / From earth I rise and seek the joys / At his right hand. / I all on earth forsake, / Its wisdom, fame, and pow'r, / And Him my only portion make, / My shield and tow'r.

The awesome presence of the almighty “I AM” demands our deepest reverence and praise. Moses realized that after foolishly asking to see the unveiled glory of the Creator of heaven and earth (Exodus 3). Sinful people before the unbridled glory and majesty of God cannot survive. Our seemingly “great worship” of our “awesome God” didn't save Moses and it does not save us. Cranach and Luther humbly acknowledged the greatness of God as Creator and Sustainer of a fallen creation, but the revealed Word of God was still necessary to announce what the realm of nature cannot disclose: the great I AM has come to graciously deliver undeserving sinners through faith in the merits of Christ's substitutionary work. Our praise does nothing to get us closer to heaven; it is the result and product of God-given faith in the promises of Jesus.

1. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the God of Moses and all who grasp the Gospel of Christ by faith (HEBREWS 11). This was, by God's unmerited grace, a central truth rediscovered by Luther and proclaimed in the artwork of Lucas Cranach and his Wittenberg studio. (Search the internet to view Cranach's Weimar altarpiece.) How did the art of Cranach echo or mirror the Word preached and written by Luther and the other Reformers? How does the Christian Church's tradition of using fine art in service of the Word of God continue in Lutheran congregations today?

2. These opening stanzas confess the twin truths proclaimed in Ps. 9:7-11 and trumpeted by Luther and Cranach: God is the holy, eternal Judge who loves righteousness and uprightness. For the sake of the righteousness and uprightness of his Anointed Son he has become the stronghold for the oppressed; the mighty deliverer of all who put their trust in the Redeemer he has sent. This is our song of praise to heaven and to our neighbor: in Jesus God has come down in love to be our merciful Shield and mighty Fortress (PS. 18:2; 144:2).

STANZAS THREE AND FOUR

3 *The God of Abr'ham praise, / Whose all-sufficient grace / Shall guide me all my pilgrim days / In all my ways. / He deigns to call me friend; / He calls Himself my God. / And He shall save me to the end / Through Jesus' blood.*

4 *He by Himself has sworn; / I on His oath depend. / I shall, on eagle wings upborne, / To heaven ascend. / I shall behold His face; / I shall His pow'r adore / And sing the wonders of His grace / Forevermore.*

True faith believes that, despite our many sins, we shall behold God and sing an unending doxology — all because of Christ and His promises sealed with His substitutionary death and resurrection. God's power serves His grace and mercy. This Christian belief is our compass in the wilderness of this life. This is what Luther proclaimed and Cranach depicted.

3. Where and how has the Almighty Lord of heaven and earth deigned to be our God, call us friends and lift us up as on the wings of an eagle? Where in God's Word do we hear clearly the promise of His good favor towards repentant sinners? Where is this reflected in the Small Catechism?

4. How do we, in our own vocations, present the truths dimly reflected in our created world but announced sharp and clear in the Bible? How does the Christian Church today use believers skilled in the fine arts to bolster the proclamation of the Holy Scriptures?

STANZAS FIVE AND SIX

5 *Though nature's strength decay, / And earth and hell withstand, / To Canaan's bounds I urge my way / At his command. / The wat'ry deep I pass, / With Jesus in my view, / And through the howling wilderness / My way pursue.*

6 *The goodly land I see, / With peace and plenty blest: / A land of sacred liberty / And endless rest. / There milk and honey flow, / And oil and wine abound, / And trees of life forever grow / With mercy crowned.*

The Lutheran Reformation announced, sang and depicted the realities of a decaying world, a humanity lost in a wilderness of its own sin. But the prophets and apostles — pointing to Christ — have announced God's deliverance. We have been baptized, not into Moses or Abraham, but into Christ, Who alone took on the howling wilderness that we deserved and made it His own, that we might enjoy the Promised Land of eternal life.

5. In the painting "The Vineyard of the Lord" (St. Mary's Church, Wittenberg), Cranach depicted the heavenly kingdom as a fruitful vineyard, being tended compassionately by Luther and the other Lutheran reformers and nourished with the Word of Christ. What in our lives now provide a foretaste of the heavenly vineyard of liberty and peace and rest?

6. Review Joel 3:18 and Is. 55:1. How is this depiction of the Promised Land "now, but not yet" for Christians? Why have generation after generation of Lutherans used these words to give comfort to those grieving over the loss of a loved one who has died in the faith?

STANZAS SEVEN, EIGHT AND NINE

7 *There dwells the Lord our king, / The Lord our righteousness, / Triumphant o'er the world and sin, / The Prince of Peace. / On Zion's sacred height / His kingdom He maintains / And glorious with His saints in light / Forever reigns.*

8 *The God who reigns on high / The great archangels sing, / And "Holy, holy, holy!" cry, / "Almighty King! / Who was and is the same / And evermore shall be: / Jehovah, Father, great I AM! / We worship Thee!"*

9 *The whole triumphant host / Give thanks to God on high. / "Hail, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!" / They ever cry. / Hail, Abr'ham's God and mine! / I join the heav'nly lays: / All might and majesty are Thine / And endless praise!*

The prophet Isaiah falls like a dead man when found in the presence of the Holy One of Israel (Isaiah 6). Even the holy angels pay reverence to their righteous Lord and King as they sing unending hymns of praise and adoration.

7. Compare the heavenly scene presented in Isaiah 6 with that revealed in Revelation 4. Why is it significant that a coal from the fire of the altar is selected to purify Isaiah from his sin? What does this foreshadow?

8. In Calvinist/Reformed congregations, images in church buildings are believed to be against the Ten Commandments (EX. 20:4; LEV. 26:1). How would you explain the "good, right and salutary" use of Christian images to a Christian friend shocked by seeing depictions of Christ and the saints in a Lutheran parish or home? How would you explain the true understanding of God's injunction in the Bible against "graven images"? (See 2 CHRON. 3:10-14 and especially NUM. 21:1-9.)