Ok, today I’m going to try to address Luther’s theology of the cross today. And let’s just get right to it, I’ll put it up on the screen the essence of Luther’s thinking on what the cross says about God. You will see that this is not an atonement theory. It’s not Jesus paid my debt, or Jesus took my punishment, or even Jesus died for my sins so that I can be forgiven. The theology of the cross is about where to look for God. We’re doing theology remember, and we all are theologians, we all think about God in a certain way. And we all tend to look for God somewhere. The theology of the cross says that God was and is most visible to us, most present, most powerful, hidden in suffering. God’s power looks like a man crucified on a cross. Hmm.

Here are three sentences that Luther wrote that lay it all out. There is a lot more of course, but this is where theologians of the cross usually start. I’ll just give it to you and then we’ll go from there. These are from the Heidelburg Disputation 1518, where Luther was called to defend his theology that was beginning to form into the Protestant reformation. These are thesis 19, 20, and 21 in order. And you see here, that these are statements about where to God is the showing up in the world. A basis for your reflection. So here goes. The theology of the cross.

“That person does not deserve to be a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened”. This is an awkward way of saying something very simple. You cannot judge God’s presence by appearances. You can’t tell by looking whether it’s God. God’s presence is not clearly perceptible. It’s not obvious.

“He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross”. So Let’s put this very simply. You are beginning to think about God rightly when you understand that God’s visible presence and power is hidden in suffering. You can’t see God’s presence, but it is hidden in suffering.

And finally, this thesis. “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is”. Here we have introduced to us the opposite of the theology of the cross, which is a theology of glory. And in a very simply I’ll interpret it this way. A theologian of glory sees God obvious in glory. In success. A theologian of the cross finds God presence in telling it like it is.

So let’s start with Luther’s story and then bring it home a little bit in terms of what this means. One of the defining moments in Luther’s life that led to the Reformation was his pilgrimage to Rome. And Luther came to Rome with starry eyes. Here was the seat of Christ and the glory of the church. Beautiful buildings, wonderful art, the best of education. The glory of God was obvious to anyone who judged by appearances. I’ve never been to St. Peter’s square, but it was being built during Luther’s time and even now is know for the Cistene Chapel and Michelangelos great painting. Obvious glorious presence. God is just so awesome in his glory. Steeples rising up into the air. Beautiful music. Glory.

But Luther soon began to realize that this church had another reality hidden behind the scenes. A painful truth. As he walked around the town he saw clergy in the brothels. And more and more and more it began to be clear that hidden behind all of this appearance and experience of glory and wonder, was a church that was really about money. The more he looked behind the scenes the more corrupt it was. This glorious Cysteine chapel was being funded by money raised by the sale of indulgences. Salvation for sale. By appearances it looked so godly and awesome and spiritual and holy and sacred. But this good was actually evil in Luther’s eyes. Because it was a cover. Built on a rip off. People were so impressed by the good works and all the effort put in. But behind the scenes was a painful truth. And Luther experienced the suffering of disillusionment. The theology of glory judges by appearance. A theologian of the cross tell things like they actually are. God’s glory lies behind a painful truth telling.

Hopefully the theology of cross is now beginning to make a little sense to you. Today we obviously live surrounded by a theology of glory. We grow up with it. Every commercial you see on television is basically built around this desire to judge by appearances. You take your product, and you spin it, to make it look good and wonderful and awesome. So the new car always seems to be breezing along the California coast right, with beautiful views. Everyone is smilling. You get this car, and it’s going to be awesome. I bought a brand new car about 3 ½ years ago now. No one told me that 6 months later, I was going to hit a pack of deer just north of Sautillo, get turned into by a semi going 75 miles an hour, and then putting gas in my car a few months ago noticing a big dent where someone had backed into me at Walmart. Ouch. My insurance company has paid more to Slim’s Body shop than I paid for the car. I mean the last time I walked out of Slim’s I said, “See you soon”. It’s not God here, but it’s the same reality pointed to. We have this need to put this spin on things that exaggerates the positive and downplays the negative. That’s the theology of glory. The theology of the cross is about a truth telling. And that as I tell the truth about my car, as painful as it might be, that I begin to make a better connection to you. Yes, this is how it is. Hidden in this painful reality God begins to appear.

Let’s talk about faith and the church today. What would be an example of the theology of glory at work in us today? I think the most obvious example for us is the issue of numbers. How many people come? People simply drool over numbers don’t they? So you have an activity and a bunch of people come. And they keep coming. Oh, God has really blessed us! We’re doing great. And then, when you talk about your church it’s like, “wow, we have this program and all these people str coming” Pretty impressive right? Looks good. And it is good. It’s awesome.

But do you see the potential for a huge problem? See, this is making God obvious in what actually happens isn’t it? It’s the theology of glory. You’re judging by appearances. And you can easily tell that it is. Because what happens if the numbers go down? Now it’s discouragement, disappointment, depression. You can just feel yourself begin to deflate. And the only way you can see to get God back is to the get the numbers up again. How can we get more people to come? Then it’s like, well we have to be more welcoming, or friendly, or more bible study, or the pastor has to be more likeable, preach better sermons. Yeah, you have to climb you’re way back up to God to get the blessing again. God This is the Husker football program. Trying to climb back to the glory days and get it all back. Then, we’ll have it. Do you see what that leads to? Constant frustration. Yeah, It’s like you’re this older grey haired 64 year old guy whose trying to get his youth back. Sooner or later you’re going to be much better off acknowledging that you aren’t what you used to be. it’s a real suffering, but God is hidden there, waiting for you, and I. With his presence and power and love and welcome. With the gift. That’s the theology of the cross. It’s not about success and glory, it’s about getting up to heaven, its about coming down to earth and telling the truth.

One more thing at this point from Luther and the Heidelberg Disputation. This is from his explanation from the last thesis that I read earlier. And if I can make this point fly, I’ll be very happy today. I’ll put this up on the screen too. Luther writes: this is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore, he prefers good works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly (looking stupid), and, in general good to evil. He who does not know Christ, prefers good works, glory, strength, and the good. Now if I said that in any other context, you would think I had lost my mind. But now do you see why he says that? Because good works, glory, strength, and looking good easily become a way to cover those areas of our life where we’re hurt, are weak, feel like an idiot, and of course discover our sin. He who does know Christ prefers suffering, the cross, weakness, folly, and evil. Because he or she has come to believe that God lies hidden there in those darker parts of ourselves with his presence. This is not against being successful or doing well or rejoicing in our achievements. But it’s cutting through to the darker places. And that’s what we really need. And that’s were God is hidden, waiting for you with his word. I love you. I share your pain. I will never let you go. You are in the process of being made into something new.

Does this kind of make sense? The theology of the cross is not popular. The popular churches present a transactional God. If you do this, this will happen. If you work hard and pray and do the right things, and don’t give up, you’ll come out on top. Right? You’ll be your best you, or something like that. And God’s blessing is associated with the obvious. Health and wealth and miracles and breakthroughs and all the rest. Listen to people talk and it will usually be about a miracle or some other form of glorious good fortune. This is the theology of glory, and it’s people who associate God with the obvious. With appearances. I do it all the time. God, help me find my car keys. Health and wealth and miracles and you’re best you are great. And sometimes I’m pretty sure that God helps me find my car keys.

But behind all of this glorious appearance and awesomeness, there is usually another reality in each one of us. Something we suffer with. Maybe it grabs us in the middle of the night. Maybe it’s a depression that we suffer with alone. One of our kids that is really hurting, but you can’t do anything about it. Or it just might be doubts. Maybe it’s a feeling of failure, and in my experience that’s the worst suffering. You come under ferocious accusation. And God just seems absent. Or it’s hard to believe. Or your faith seems small and weak. The theology of the cross is for you, its’ not for those who have it all together with God. Because as you find yourself in that place, the theology of the cross says that hidden exactly there, God is most fully present. Yup. One day you will look back and know that exactly there, God was doing his best work in you. Amen.