

# A Treasure Above All Treasures: Martin Luther on Dying Well

**MATTHEW D. HASTE**

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**Matthew D. Haste** is Associate Professor of Ministry Studies at the Columbia Biblical Seminary of Columbia International University and the Pastor of Preaching at Midlands Church in Columbia, South Carolina. He is the co-author (with Robert L. Plummer) of *Held in Honor: Wisdom for your Marriage from Voices of the Past* (Christian Focus, 2015) and the co-author (with Shane W. Parker) of a forthcoming book on Puritans in pastoral ministry.

In the early morning hours of February 18, 1546, Martin Luther (1483–1546) lay dying in the town where he was born, miles away from his beloved family. His room at the Eisleben inn was crowded with witnesses hastily gathered by his friend and associate Justus Jonas (1493–1555). Anxious questions filled their heads: Would the great terrorizer of Rome finally recant or would he willfully die outside of the Church? Would he hold fast to his Evangelical confession or would he call for a priest to administer extreme unction? Would he demonstrate peace with God by remaining calm and fearless in the face of death; or would the Devil himself snatch the old Doctor from this life without warning? Every minute of his final hours was faithfully recorded for posterity; every statement dutifully confirmed by the witnesses.<sup>1</sup> The future of the Reformation itself seemed to hang in the balance. As twentieth-century biographer Heiko A. Oberman explains, “The deathbed in the Eisleben inn had become a stage; and straining their ears to catch Luther’s last words were enemies as well as friends.”<sup>2</sup>

What they eventually heard has echoed down through the centuries. Two days prior to his death, Luther produced his last written statement, which

ended in the famous line: “We are beggars: this is true.”<sup>3</sup> In his final moments, he offered himself to God, reciting the words of Psalm 31:5 in a three-fold repetition: “Into thine hand I commit my spirit; thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, God of truth.”<sup>4</sup> Then, as he closed his eyes for the final time and grew quiet, Jonas and his colleague Michael Coelius (1492–1559) leaned in to ask one final question, “Reverend Father, do you wish to die, standing up for Christ and for the Teaching that you have preached?” Without reservation, Luther uttered one final confession of faith, “Yes.”<sup>5</sup>

Carl Trueman captures the symbolic significance of this moment when he says, “It was a quintessential Protestant end: faith in the Word—no final unction, last rites, or final communion ... Indeed, his own way of dying exemplified how he had himself transformed pastoral care and, indeed, the piety of dying.”<sup>6</sup> This article utilizes Trueman’s reflection on Luther’s final moments as a starting point. Just how exactly did Martin Luther transform the piety of dying? How did a former monk in service to the Church come to reject its rituals and what did he commend in their place? This article explores these questions by considering the general approach to death in the Middle Ages, by examining Luther’s writings on the subject, and by seeking to reconstruct how the great reformer administered pastoral care to the sick and dying. By applying Reformation doctrines to the deathbed, Luther helped the dying discover assurance of salvation not in their own efforts but through faith in the finished work of Christ.

## **DEATH IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

According to Johan Huizinga, no other epoch of history “has laid so much stress on the thought of death” as the late Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> This preoccupation was somewhat understandable given the high mortality rates throughout Europe at the time. Beginning in the fourteenth century, plagues terrorized the continent at regular intervals. During an outbreak, a person could be seemingly healthy one day and in his grave but a few days later. Unreliable medicine, lack of personal hygiene, and poor living conditions further contributed to the early deaths of many, creating a morbid uncertainty that hung like a cloud over everyday life.

The grim reality of death found its way into the art and literature of the period. The “death dance” was a common scene depicted in paintings and

woodcuts, which usually included a skeletal figure dragging a person to the grave.<sup>8</sup> According to Huizinga, the image was intended to teach “the frailty and vanity of earthly things” in addition to “social equality as the Middle Ages understood it.”<sup>9</sup> Death would eventually come to all; so it was wise to be ready. Handbooks on how to prepare for death, known broadly as the *ars moriendi* (“art of dying”) were prevalent throughout the era. Recent studies suggest that these works were rooted in the late medieval doctrine of the uncertainty of salvation and in the belief that individuals could merit salvation through their own choices.<sup>10</sup>

The certainty of death and the ambiguity of the afterlife led to widespread fear and various attempts to explain the terrors of the age. The plagues were traced back to the wrath of God. Unforeseen accidents were viewed as the Devil’s work. The manner of a man’s death became a verdict on his life. This context led naturally to the rise of the Roman Catholic practice of extreme unction. Dying well seemed more important than ever before.

By Luther’s day, extreme unction was looked to as a final opportunity for absolution before death, but the general practice of anointing with oil did not always have this association. The ancient Israelites anointed the body with the hope of physical healing (e.g., Isa 1:6; Lev 14:15–18; Ps 103:3). In the NT, James prescribed a specific method for anointing and praying for a sick person’s recovery, suggesting a relationship between the health of the body and the health of the soul (James 5:13–16). As Brian C. Brewer demonstrates, over time the pastoral call to anoint the sick became conflated with the promise of spiritual healing through penance.<sup>11</sup>

In the ninth century, Bishop Theodulf of Orleans (750–821) developed specific instructions for anointing the body of a sick person that included directives on how to spiritually prepare for death. Among other things, he recommended reciting the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and making the sign of the cross in order to ward off demonic activity.<sup>12</sup> According to Brewer, this method “gradually became the predominant view in the Middle Ages” as the Christian call to anoint the sick became synonymous with the administration of last rites.<sup>13</sup>

In time, these last rites—or *extrema unctio* as first termed by Peter Lombard (1100–1160)—were believed to absolve all sin before death. By the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) articulated the following as the accepted position of the Church: “We must say that the principal effect

of this sacrament is the remission of sin as to its remnants, and consequently even as to its guilt.”<sup>14</sup> This notion was codified in the Council of Florence’s Decree for the Armenians in 1439 and became standard Roman Catholic practice throughout Europe.

In addition to extreme unction, various superstitions began to surround the deathbed itself. Some believed that repeating particular verses of Scripture with one’s final breaths could ensure forgiveness of sins.<sup>15</sup> In Germany, individuals looked to relics, pilgrimages to sacred sites, and even magic to ward off whatever devilish activity might hinder the path to heaven.<sup>16</sup> Recognizing that death threatened to call at any moment, the people of the Middle Ages were hungry for whatever hope and assurance they could find.

This is the world in which Martin Luther came of age. He grew up hearing folk tales of the devil’s trickery. He watched plagues sweep through Wittenberg on three separate occasions.<sup>17</sup> In his youth, he famously made a covenant with a saint to become a monk if only she would spare his life. As Theodore G. Tappert notes, “A sense of the nearness of death . . . played a prominent part in [his] life.”<sup>18</sup> While Luther would eventually transcend such notions, he first absorbed them.

In many ways, Luther was, as Timothy George remarks, “just like everyone else, only more so.”<sup>19</sup> His tender conscience would not settle for the superstitions of his day. So when he embraced the gospel of justification by faith alone, it naturally led to change. According to Ernst Walter Zeeden, Luther found that “everything—polity, worship, and law—had to be transformed or reshaped in such a way that it was consonant with the new doctrine or at least did not contradict it.”<sup>20</sup> The Christian’s approach to death was no different; but this change took time. A close look at Luther’s published works and pastoral correspondence reveals that as his theology developed, his understanding of the piety of dying transformed as well.

## **PUBLISHED WORKS**

### ***Fourteen Consolations***

Luther’s first printed comments on the subject of death appeared in a short work entitled *Fourteen Consolations*, which he wrote to comfort Frederick III (1463–1525) when it seemed the Elector was near death.<sup>21</sup> Although this treatise would not be published until 1520, Luther

composed it in August 1519, offering an early glimpse into how the reformer thought about death and dying. *Fourteen Consolations* takes its structure from a popular German legend of the Christ child surrounded by fourteen saints, each of whom is assigned to ward off a particular disease. Luther employed the framework to highlight seven evils from which Christ has delivered the believer and seven blessings that Christians enjoy, even in the face of death. Combined, these fourteen consolations provide a “literary altar screen” for the dying Christian to contemplate in his final hours.<sup>22</sup>

Luther began with an emphasis on the role of the Word as the root of the Christian’s comfort, noting that true consolation is “to be drawn from the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>23</sup> The Word calls the Christian to keep both suffering and blessing ever before him, regardless of circumstances (cf. Ecclesiasticus 11:25). In the first half of the work, Luther endeavored to put the Elector’s suffering in a proper perspective by focusing on seven evils. This was not a diversion but an application of Luther’s theology of the cross to his sovereign’s present affliction. At the cross, Jesus “consecrated and hallowed all suffering” so that “death is now a door to life, the curse a fount of blessing, and shame the mother of glory.”<sup>24</sup> As the believer reflects on the evils within and around him, he should see how his own difficulties pale in comparison to what Christ endured, and recognize that the death and resurrection of Jesus triumphs over all suffering.

In the second half of the work, Luther considered seven blessings offered through Christ’s transformation of death. For the believer, death can be called a blessing because it helps a person appreciate grace, promises an end to earthly struggles, and begins eternal joy. Such conclusions are the fruit of meditating on the blessings available through the risen Lord, where “the heart can find its supreme joy and lasting possessions.”<sup>25</sup>

Luther’s approach to consoling Elector Frederick was to call him to fix his eyes on the finished work of Christ. As Jane Strohl summarizes, “This whole treatise is concerned with what one sees.”<sup>26</sup> However, Luther did not want his reader looking to the saints or to relics for help. Frederick was renowned for his extensive collection of relics, which numbered over nineteen-thousand at the time and claimed to include such items as a fragment of the crown of thorns and some of Mary’s milk.<sup>27</sup> At this stage in his career, Luther did not directly oppose the possession of such relics but instead steered his reader

away from hoping in them: “For you there are far greater merits, rewards, and blessings in these sufferings than in those relics.”<sup>28</sup> In sum, Luther encouraged his Elector to look to the agony of Christ to put his own suffering in perspective and as his ultimate hope to triumph over death.<sup>29</sup>

### ***A Sermon on Preparing to Die***

Luther’s first published statement on extreme unction was actually an affirmation of the practice. In the summer of 1519, George Spalatin (1484–1545) asked Luther to send a word of encouragement to one of Elector Frederick’s counselors named Mark Schart, who was particularly distressed about the thought of dying. It took several months and a follow-up request before Luther was able to pen a response, but he eventually obliged, composing a lengthy sermon addressed to the troubled man.<sup>30</sup> While he adapted the genre to fit his own theology and purposes, Luther’s *Sermon on Preparing to Die* was a conscious contribution to (and reformation of) the *ars moriendi* tradition.<sup>31</sup>

The work moved swiftly through twenty specific injunctions aimed at helping a person prepare for an honorable death. Ever the practical thinker, Luther first counseled Schart to order his temporal goods and make amends with anyone whom he had wronged. Then, Luther turned his primary attention to preparing the soul to meet God. Whereas the *ars moriendi* tradition tended to focus on the readiness of the individual, Luther highlighted the merits of the sacraments themselves: “We must occupy ourselves much more with the sacraments and their virtues than with our sins.”<sup>32</sup> Contra popular opinion in his day, Luther did not consider the efficacy of the sacraments dependent upon the recipient’s worthiness, but instead on the sure promises of God.<sup>33</sup> Here, Luther offered a depth of consolation that he believed was lacking in the *ars moriendi* literature.<sup>34</sup> He understood that thoughts about death, sin, and hell were terrifying. So, he counseled his reader to turn his mind away from such realities and to “gaze at the heavenly picture of Christ” instead.<sup>35</sup> In Jesus, the believer would find one who not only conquered these evils but also provided a model for how to endure them. According to Austra Reinis, “Luther’s conviction that the Christian is to believe the promises of Christ, and to appropriate the benefits of Christ’s work, sets Luther apart from much of the *ars moriendi* tradition.”<sup>36</sup>

How can a Christian fix his gaze on Jesus? Luther’s answer reveals his thinking on the role of the sacraments at this point. One should prepare for

death through “a sincere confession” and “with the holy Christian sacrament ... and with unction.”<sup>37</sup> On the one hand, it is perhaps not surprising that Luther would still affirm unction at this stage. However, a letter written to Spalatin dated December 18 of the same year reveals that his views on the subject were quickly changing. That fall, Luther worked on a series of sermons on the sacraments, but after addressing penance, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, he determined not to continue with the other sacraments recognized at the time. In the letter to Spalatin, Luther explained why, articulating a seminal form of the position that he would publish in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* the following year.<sup>38</sup> It seems that Luther’s understanding on the sacraments developed throughout the latter half of 1519 as he took a closer look at what the Scriptures taught on the subject.

Even at this point, some of Luther’s mature theological positions are discernible in *A Sermon on Preparing to Die*. Throughout the work, he emphasized both the objectivity of the sacrament and the necessity of personal faith. He considered the sacraments “a truly great comfort and at the same time a visible sign of divine intent.”<sup>39</sup> They possessed the power to ease the conscience and hold the attention of the dying believer, who might be tempted to fixate on the terrors of death instead. However, as Luther argued, “Faith must be present for a firm reliance and cheerful venturing on such signs and promises of God.”<sup>40</sup> No sacrament would be effective apart from personal faith. True comfort is found in not only receiving the sacrament but in esteeming it as God’s ordained means of grace. In this way, the sacraments function like the many other blessings God offers to his children in the midst of great trials. After recapping these blessings a final time, Luther ended the work with a note of encouragement: “Therefore, we ought to thank him with a joyful heart for showing us such wonderful, rich, and immeasurable grace and mercy against death, hell, and sin, and to laud and love his grace rather than fearing death so greatly.”<sup>41</sup>

### ***The Babylonian Captivity of the Church***

The following year, Luther published his first extensive assault on the sacramental system in his famous polemic, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.<sup>42</sup> Arguing that a true sacrament was a promise from God represented by a sign, Luther rejected the long-held belief that the NT established seven sacraments, which had been accepted Catholic teaching since the twelfth

century.<sup>43</sup> Luther found only two ceremonies that met his criteria for a sacrament: baptism and the bread. While much of the book focused on restoring proper observation of the Lord's Supper and baptism, Luther devoted a section to each of the other five practices to demonstrate why they were not sacraments. Regarding unction, Luther was unequivocal in his dismissal of the official position of the Church: "If ever folly has been uttered, it has been uttered especially on this subject."<sup>44</sup>

From his perspective, the James 5 proof text was problematic. Notwithstanding his concerns about the book as a whole, Luther argued, "No apostle has the right on his own authority to institute a sacrament ... For this belongs to Christ alone."<sup>45</sup> Lombard had admitted as much in the twelfth century but argued that since the NT confirmed the practice, unction was still established by God.<sup>46</sup> Luther disagreed, citing how Paul dutifully passed along only what he "received of the Lord" to the Corinthian church concerning the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:23). Without such a divine promise in the text of Scripture, Luther saw no reason to admit unction as a sacrament.

He also took exception to the inconsistent application of the practice in his day. If unction truly possessed the power to effect healing, why relegate it only to the dying? Luther pointed out, "[James] says expressly: 'Is any one sick?' He does not say: 'Is any one dying?'"<sup>47</sup> By relegating unction to one's final hour, the Roman interpretation deprived countless sick persons of the proper benefits of this rite; furthermore, the passage seemed to suggest that this practice should lead to the person's recovery, not precede his death. If unction were truly effective, it would not signal the *extreme* end of life, but the beginning of healing. As Luther put it, "If it is extreme unction, it does not heal, but gives way to the disease; but if it heals, it cannot be extreme unction."<sup>48</sup>

It is important to note that Luther did not dismiss the practice commended by James when it was properly understood and applied; he merely questioned its status as a sacrament. In his view, James was not calling for a priest to perform last rites over a dying person but was encouraging the church—and its leaders in particular—to pray in faith. Here Luther's burgeoning doctrine of the priesthood of all believers can be seen. Were God's people to exercise faith, Luther believed that God might indeed heal the sufferer. However, the practice set forth by James was different from the so-called sacrament of extreme unction "in form, use, power, [and] purpose."<sup>49</sup> Brewer summarizes

Luther's concern as follows: "By converting this simple yet powerful ministry of the faithful to one another into a sacerdotal and sacramental ritual for the dying, the popes and clerics ... [had commandeered] the common and honorable pastoral ministry of the church."<sup>50</sup> Luther believed that James was simply calling for the mature members of a congregation to pray with faith for the sick among them. As such, he pointed out that the blessings supposedly offered through this sacrament were actually available to anyone who "hears and believes the Word of God."<sup>51</sup>

In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther dispelled the notion that extreme unction should be regarded as a sacrament without dismissing the practice altogether.<sup>52</sup> He interpreted the Jacobean passage as a portrait of pastoral care, rather than as a prescription for last rites. He argued that the call to pray could be answered by any within the church and that suffering persons needed to be reminded of the hope of the gospel more than they needed a particular deathbed ceremony. Instead of looking to a priest to offer final absolution from sin, they should look to the finished work of Christ on the cross.

In his published works, Luther began to dismantle the system by which the Catholic Church prepared its congregants to die. In his pastoral writings, Luther reconstructed a new model rooted in the sufficiency of Christ and the assurance offered in the gospel of grace. If extreme unction was unnecessary, how exactly could a minister help a Christian die well? Luther never produced a manual to this end, but his correspondence and personal example provide sufficient evidence to understand how he would have answered the question.

### **PASTORAL WRITINGS AND KEY THEMES EMPHASIZED**

Tappert observes that amid all of Luther's recognition as an ecclesial reformer and national hero, "It is sometimes forgotten that he was also—and above all else—a pastor and shepherd of souls."<sup>53</sup> As a pastor, Luther was frequently called upon to advise and console others. In many cases, these requests interrupted his work; yet the reformer demonstrated a remarkable willingness to administer pastoral care.<sup>54</sup> Luther's approach to dying well is visible in several key themes that often appeared in his counsel to the sick and the bereaved.

### ***Look to Christ***

In the winter of 1530, Luther was troubled over reports of his father's ill health. Ever the committed son, Luther would have gladly visited his father or allowed his parents to move in with his family if circumstances permitted, but in this case, a letter had to suffice. After expressing affection and recounting his prayers, Luther called on his father to look to Christ in the midst of his suffering. "He has such great power over sin and death," the son wrote, "that they cannot harm us, and he is so heartily true and kind that he cannot and will not forsake us, at least if we ask his help without doubting."<sup>55</sup> To encourage his father in the face of doubt, he reminded him that suffering for the sake of Christ was God's confirmation of his faith. If God willed for him to survive, he would grant him grace to accept a few more years in this "vale of tears."<sup>56</sup> If death was to come soon, Luther wanted his father to know that his passing was a small thing to God and should not be feared. Throughout the letter, Luther encouraged his father to look to Christ and his unending love:

He has proved his love in taking your sins upon himself and paying for them with his blood, as he tells you by the gospel. He has given you grace to believe by his Spirit, and has prepared and accomplished everything most surely, so that you need not care or fear any more, but only keep your heart strong and reliant on his Word and faith. If you do that, let him care for the rest. He will see to it that everything turns out well.<sup>57</sup>

Luther's personal correspondence was consistent with the advice he gave in his published works. Rather than looking to penance or unction for comfort, he encouraged others to fix their thoughts on Christ and his power over death.

### ***Rest in God's Purposes***

Just over a year after his father died, Luther composed a similar final message to his other parent, who was now fatally ill. In this letter, Luther assumed the role of spiritual comforter, seeking to offer his mother the kind of consolation he would gladly speak to her in person if he could. In terms of understanding Luther's approach to preparing for death, few available documents are more helpful than this tender letter to his dying mother.

He first encouraged his mother to recognize that her suffering was God's

“gracious, fatherly chastisement,” and, as such, it was far less severe than the afflictions of the godless, certain other believers, or even Christ himself.<sup>58</sup> Luther often pointed to the agonies Christ endured to help believers put their own trials in perspective.<sup>59</sup> He counseled his mother to receive her suffering as from the hand of God and to rest in his will. In his other writings, Luther acknowledged various divine purposes at work in the difficulties of this life but he tended not to speculate on the specific reasons for particular events. As he explained to a father grieving over the death of his son, “It is enough for us that we have a gracious God. Why he permits this or that evil to befall us should not trouble us at all.”<sup>60</sup>

After pointing to God’s greater purposes for her suffering, Luther reminded his mother that Christ was more than a mere example to follow; he was the true foundation to her faith. The remainder of the letter focused on Jesus’ words in John 16:33: “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” This statement grounded the believer’s hope in Christ’s victory over the devil, sin, and death. If his mother were to waver in this hope, she would be restoring the tyranny of these conquered foes. Instead, Luther imagined how his mother might set her heart at rest by speaking boldly to her greatest fears: “Dear death, dear sin, how is it that you are alive and terrify me? Do you not know that you have been overcome? Do you, death, not know that you are quite dead?”<sup>61</sup> Thus, Luther counseled his mother to set her heart at rest in God’s sovereignty over suffering and Christ’s victory over death.

### ***The Word and the Sacraments***

Resting in God provided freedom from the superstitious practices of the day. In a 1524 letter to an Austrian nobleman, Luther urged a grieving man to stop his daily masses and vigils for the soul of his deceased wife, for such “unchristian practices ... greatly anger God.”<sup>62</sup> Reflecting his own development on an issue that he was ambivalent about just a few years prior, Luther sounded off against the practice without reservation:

Such vigils are a mockery of God ... It is a shameful and terrible thing that men should be so bold as to change this and other institutions of God from a sacrament for the living into a good work and a sacrifice for the dead. Beware of this. Do not be a participant in this horrible error which priests and monks have invented ... to get money and property without helping either the dead or the living.<sup>63</sup>

In the place of such rituals, Luther counseled the grieving to seek consolation in the Scriptures, especially the Psalms.<sup>64</sup> To his dying father, Luther had recommended Psalm 91 in particular, which he considered ideal to read to the sick.<sup>65</sup> He hoped that his father's pastor would be called to his side for this purpose.<sup>66</sup> Though he dismissed the necessity of extreme unction, Luther saw great value in having a minister present at one's death. Upon hearing that Erasmus (1466–1536) had rejected such an offer on his deathbed, Luther exclaimed: "God forbid that in my last hour I shouldn't want to have a godly minister of the Word, that I couldn't summon the nearest one at hand, that I shouldn't want to thank God!"<sup>67</sup> In response to an inquiry from a neighboring pastor about the minister's responsibility to his people during an outbreak of the plague, Luther highlighted the importance of pastoral care: "In time of death one is especially in need of the ministry which can strengthen and comfort one's conscience with God's Word and Sacrament in order to overcome death with faith."<sup>68</sup>

When properly understood, Luther sought to help others focus their attention on the objective promises found in the Lord's Supper in their final hours. He did not think it necessary to take the sacrament a final time, but he saw great value in calling to mind the blessings it offered. In his letter to his mother, he pointed out the true hope she possessed in contrast to the papal errors she had left behind. As Luther explained, the Catholic Church ignorantly taught people to rely on their own works, on the mother of God, and on the saints because they considered Christ "a severe judge and tyrant."<sup>69</sup> The gospel, by contrast, presented Jesus as "our mediator, our throne of grace, and our bishop before God in heaven."<sup>70</sup> For Luther, these spiritual realities were manifested in this world by the sacraments. So, he wrote to his mother, "In the gospel, in Baptism and in the Sacrament [of the Altar] you possess his sign and seal of this vocation, and as long as you hear him addressing you in these, you will have no trouble or danger."<sup>71</sup>

Thus, the Word and the sacraments provide an objective hope to which suffering Christians can cling. Luther knew well the great terrors surrounding the possibility of death.<sup>72</sup> But he did not want anyone turning to weak imitations for comfort. Instead, he pointed suffering believers to the Word of God and the sacraments as tangible ways to look to Christ in the midst of their pain.

### ***Faith and Fear***

If death seemed near, Luther encouraged a person to embrace faith and reject fear. He commended those who were “unafraid of death, that sleep which is the common destiny of all good men.”<sup>73</sup> He accepted the popular notion that a tranquil death was evidence of a person’s secure relationship with God.<sup>74</sup> To this end, he sometimes mocked death and played down its terrors.<sup>75</sup> At other times, he sought to comfort the dying that they might go in peace.

At the bedside of his wife’s aunt, who lived with the Luthers in their Wittenberg home, Luther spoke tenderly, knowing that his suffering relative had but a few hours to live. “Your faith rests alone on the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the resurrection and the life. You shall lack nothing. You will not die but will fall asleep like an infant in a cradle, and when morning dawns, you will rise again and live forever.”<sup>76</sup>

While he did counsel the godly to look to Christ and suffer with courage, he was no stoic. Indeed, fear of death loomed large in his own theology.<sup>77</sup> He once remarked, “I don’t like to see examples of joyful death ... Fear is something natural because death is a punishment, and therefore something sad.”<sup>78</sup> The only people who seemed to face death without any emotion were the heathen who gave no thought to God nor the coming judgment.<sup>79</sup> For the believer, death provoked a final onslaught from the Devil and thus, the need for faith in the promises of God to silence the enemy’s rage.<sup>80</sup>

So, Luther recognized that death caused a mixture of emotions for the Christian. It called for faith but fear was quite natural. The beginning of joy was rooted in sorrow. In the wake of his daughter’s death, Luther marveled at how he could be so thankful in his spirit and yet so troubled in his flesh.<sup>81</sup> In the end, death provided an affirmation of the sovereignty of God and an opportunity to reflect on his power above all things: “Whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s—in the genitive singular and not in the nominative plural.”<sup>82</sup>

### ***A Christian End***

Luther was just as concerned about dying well as everyone else, but he came to define the criteria in his own way. Last rites and absolution were not necessary but a man’s final hours still testified to his faith (or lack thereof). In various letters to grieving friends and family, Luther commended those who died well and came to a proper Christian end.

To a weeping widow, he wrote, “It should console you to know that when

your husband died he was in his right mind and had Christian confidence in our Lord, which I was exceedingly glad to hear.”<sup>83</sup> To a hurting husband, he commended the man’s wife for her “resolute spirit and firm faith in Christ” during her final hours: “Knowing that she was facing death, she confessed him again and again, called upon Christ alone, and, offering herself wholly to God, was resigned to his will.”<sup>84</sup> Such an end constituted “a good death” in Luther’s view and was reason for thanksgiving.<sup>85</sup> As he reminded another widower, “An affectionate wife is the greatest treasure on earth, but a blessed end is a treasure above all treasures and an everlasting comfort.”<sup>86</sup>

For Luther, a blessed end—expressed by faith in Christ and trust in the will of God—came to replace the deathbed rituals of Rome as the concrete hope of eternal life. When a young man died at the university, Luther consoled his parents on these very grounds:

Let this be your best comfort, as it is ours, that he fell asleep (rather than departed) decently and softly with such a fine testimony of his faith on his lips that we all marveled. There can be as little doubt that he is with God, his true Father, in eternal blessedness, as there can be doubt that the Christian faith is true. Such a beautiful Christian end as his cannot fail to lead heavenward.<sup>87</sup>

Such an end provided tangible proof of God’s saving grace.<sup>88</sup> Extreme unction was unnecessary so long as faith was present: “It is well with us as long as we fall asleep with sure confidence in the Son of God.”<sup>89</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As is often the case with Luther, it is tempting to remember him as more of a modern Evangelical than he truly was. He certainly transformed the piety of dying during his lifetime and cast aside the medieval notion that extreme unction was necessary to die well. Yet, he did not dismiss the practice altogether and he continued to place the sacraments at the center of Christian spirituality.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, his perspective on death was still influenced by the haunting fears of his age. Yet, in the midst of “this world with devils filled,” he learned to look beyond himself and beyond the empty rituals of the Church.<sup>91</sup> In his preaching, in his correspondence, and on his deathbed, he sought a sure confidence in Christ alone.

The sufficiency of Christ and the efficacy of faith brought comfort to Luther even in the midst of personal tragedy. In September 1542, Luther's beloved thirteen-year-old daughter, Lena, lay sick in bed.<sup>92</sup> He spoke tenderly to her: "Dear Magdalene, my little daughter, you would be glad to stay here with me, your father. Are you also glad to go to your Father in heaven?" Lena replied, "Yes, dear father, as God wills."<sup>93</sup> A few days later, the little girl died in her father's arms. In the midst of their grief, the family took comfort in her courage. Months later, this sense of peace was on Luther's mind as he wrote to Justus Jonas, commending his friend's wife for her "many godly and blessed expressions of faith" in her final hours. Recognizing the value of such a noble Christian death, Luther reflected, "It was in this way that my daughter also fell asleep, and this is my great and only consolation."<sup>94</sup> Luther was confident in Lena's salvation because his daughter had demonstrated confidence in Christ. No last rites were needed; the little girl was justified by faith. In this way, Luther applied the core doctrines of the Reformation to the deathbed, creating a uniquely Protestant path to dying well.

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- <sup>1</sup> The primary accounts are gathered in Martin Ebon, ed., *The Last Days of Luther by Justus Jonas, Michael Coelius, and Others* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970). In addition to these reliable versions, Ebon makes reference to numerous rumors that circulated at the time claiming that Luther had taken his own life or drank himself to death. Martin Ebon, "Only Thirty-One Days," in Ebon, *Last Days*, 18.
- <sup>2</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (trans., Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 3.
- <sup>3</sup> This document is reproduced in Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 54 (ed., Theodore G. Tappert; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 476.
- <sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted all Scripture quotations come from the King James Version.
- <sup>5</sup> Justus Jonas, Michael Coelius, et al., "Concerning the Christian Departure from this Mortal Life of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther," in Ebon, *Last Days*, 77.
- <sup>6</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 54.
- <sup>7</sup> Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999). See also, T. S. R. Boase, *Death in the Middle Ages* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972).
- <sup>8</sup> For pictorial examples, see Boase, *Death in the Middle Ages*.
- <sup>9</sup> Huizinga, *Waning of Middle Ages*, 131.
- <sup>10</sup> See Austra Reinis, *Reforming the Art of Dying: The ars moriendi in the German Reformation (1519–1528)* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2007), 17–46.
- <sup>11</sup> See Brian C. Brewer, *Martin Luther and the Seven Sacraments: A Contemporary Protestant Reappraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 140–45.
- <sup>12</sup> William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1964), 35; via Brewer, *Luther and the Seven Sacraments*, 142.
- <sup>13</sup> Brewer, *Luther and the Seven Sacraments*, 142.
- <sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, Suppl. 30, 3:2671–72; via Brewer, *Luther and the Seven Sacraments*, 144.
- <sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms II*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 11 (trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman; ed. Hilton

- C. Oswald; St. Louis: Concordia, 1976), 401.
- <sup>16</sup> Brewer, *Luther and the Seven Sacraments*, 145.
- <sup>17</sup> Luther lived through at least three such outbreaks in Wittenberg—in 1527, 1535, and 1539. In 1527, he wrote a lengthy letter to a neighboring pastor about how ministers should respond during an outbreak. Tappert, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 230–44.
- <sup>18</sup> Theodore G. Tappert, “Luther and Death,” in Ebon, *Last Days*, 9.
- <sup>19</sup> Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1988), 23. See also, Tappert, “Luther and Death,” in Ebon, *Last Days*, 9–12.
- <sup>20</sup> Ernst Walter Zeeden, *Faith and Act: The Survival of Medieval Ceremonies in the Lutheran Reformation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2012), 1.
- <sup>21</sup> Martin Luther, *Fourteen Consolations*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 42 (trans. Martin H. Bertram; ed. Martin O. Dietrich; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 117–66. Frederick III, or Frederick the Wise as he is often remembered, was the Duke of Saxony during Luther’s early career who famously secured asylum for the reformer following the Diet of Worms.
- <sup>22</sup> Luther, *Fourteen Consolations*, in *Luther’s Works*, 42:119.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 42:124.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 42:141.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 42:163.
- <sup>26</sup> Jane E. Strohl, “Luther’s Fourteen Consolations,” in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther’s Practical Theology* (ed. Timothy J. Weingert; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 321.
- <sup>27</sup> Luther, *Fourteen Consolations*, in *Luther’s Works*, 42:143.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* When a second edition of this work appeared in 1535, Luther intentionally left the original edition intact, even though he acknowledged that he no longer agreed with some of its language. It is likely that his Roman Catholic use of the term “merits” would have been among the statements he would have later stated differently if he had rewritten it.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> Martin Luther, *A Sermon on Preparing to Die*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 42 (trans. Martin H. Bertram; ed. Martin O. Dietrich; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 95–116.
- <sup>31</sup> Reinis argues that this sermon became the model for a new version of Reformation *ars moriendi* aimed at instilling assurance of salvation in the dying believer. See Reinis, *Reforming the Art of Dying*, 1–16.
- <sup>32</sup> Luther, *On Preparing to Die*, in *Luther’s Works*, 42:100.
- <sup>33</sup> Here, Reinis argues that Luther is turning tradition on its head. The *ars moriendi* literature taught that a person must confess all their sins in order to properly to receive the sacrament a final time. This often led to anxiety over whether or not a dying person had properly prepared themselves. By contrast, Luther focused the attention not on the dying person’s readiness but on the efficacy of the sacrament itself. Reinis, *Reforming the Art of Dying*, 66–67.
- <sup>34</sup> “Many books have been written . . . on how we are to prepare for death: nothing but error, and people have only become more downcast.” Cited in Reinis, *Reforming the Art of Dying*, 1.
- <sup>35</sup> Luther, *On Preparing to Die*, in *Luther’s Works*, 42:105.
- <sup>36</sup> Reinis, *Reforming the Art of Dying*, 53.
- <sup>37</sup> Luther, *On Preparing to Die*, in *Luther’s Works*, 42:100.
- <sup>38</sup> Besides baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and penance, Luther regarded “none of the others as a sacrament, for there is no sacrament except where there is a direct divine promise, exercising our faith.” Preserved Smith, ed., *Luther’s Correspondence and other Contemporary Letters*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1913), No. 206.
- <sup>39</sup> Luther, *On Preparing to Die*, in *Luther’s Works*, 42:108.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 42:110.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 42:115.
- <sup>42</sup> Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 36 (trans. A. T. W. Steinhauser; rev. Frederick C. Ahrens and Abdel Ross Wentz; ed. Abdul Ross Wentz; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959).
- <sup>43</sup> This specific enumeration, which recognized baptism, confirmation, the Lord’s Supper, marriage, orders, penance, and extreme unction as sacraments, was first established by Peter Lombard and was eventually codified by the Second Council of Lyons in 1274.
- <sup>44</sup> Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, in *Luther’s Works*, 36:118.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* Luther’s skepticism toward the book of James is well-known. Here, he pointed out its disputed

- authorship but did not build his case on that concern. For more, see Martin Luther, *Prefaces to the New Testament*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (trans. Charles M. Jacobs; rev. E. Theodore Bachmann; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 395–98.
- <sup>46</sup> See Elizabeth Frances Rogers, *Peter Lombard and the Sacramental System* (Oakland: University of California Libraries, 1917), 221; via Brewer, *Luther and the Seven Sacraments*, 14.
- <sup>47</sup> Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, in *Luther's Works*, 36:119.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 36:120.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.
- <sup>50</sup> Brewer, *Luther and the Seven Sacraments*, 150.
- <sup>51</sup> Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, in *Luther's Works*, 36:122.
- <sup>52</sup> See also, Martin Luther, *Against the Thirty-two Articles of the Lowain Theologians, 1545*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 34 (trans. Lewis W. Spitz; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 349, 357.
- <sup>53</sup> Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 18 (ed. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 13.
- <sup>54</sup> For more on this aspect of Luther's ministry, see Dennis Ngien, *Luther as a Spiritual Adviser: The Interface of Theology and Piety in Luther's Devotional Writings* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007); Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).
- <sup>55</sup> Tappert, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 31.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* This is a favorite phrase of Luther's to refer to life in this world. See also pp. 41, 70 of the same volume.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.
- <sup>59</sup> See, for example, Martin Luther, *Two Funeral Sermons, 1532*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 51 (trans. John W. Doberstein; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 229–56.
- <sup>60</sup> See Tappert, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 69.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 54. See also, Preserved Smith and Charles M. Jacobs, eds., *Luther's Correspondence and other Contemporary Letters*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1918), No. 577.
- <sup>63</sup> Tappert, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 54.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 33. Indeed, Hans Luther's pastor would be summoned within three months and is said to have read this letter to the dying man in his final hours. When asked if he affirmed its contents, the elder Luther replied, "Of course! If I didn't believe it, I'd be a knave!"
- <sup>67</sup> Luther, *Table Talk*, in *Luther's Works*, 54:312.
- <sup>68</sup> Tappert, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 232.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* See also, Luther, *Two Funeral Sermons*, in *Luther's Works*, 51:242.
- <sup>72</sup> Luther despaired of his own life on several specific occasions. For a brief summary of these experiences and their impact on his psyche, see Tappert, "Luther and Death," in *Last Days of Luther*, 9–12.
- <sup>73</sup> Tappert, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 47. Upon receiving the letter, Frederick Myconius (1490–1546) revived and subsequently lived for five more years, crediting Luther's encouragement for his recovery.
- <sup>74</sup> See, for example, his funeral sermon for Duke John of Saxony (1468–1532). Luther, *Two Funeral Sermons*, in *Luther's Works*, 51:237–42.
- <sup>75</sup> See, for example, Luther's cheeky response to false rumors about his own death. Luther, *Table Talk*, in *Luther's Works*, 54:238.
- <sup>76</sup> Tappert, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 46.
- <sup>77</sup> "The greatest thing in death is fear of death." Luther, *Table Talk*, in *Luther's Works*, 54:430.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 54:65.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 54:190.
- <sup>80</sup> Luther, *Two Funeral Sermons*, in *Luther's Works*, 51:241–42. See also, Luther, *Table Talk*, in *Luther's Works*, 54:146.
- <sup>81</sup> He concluded, "According to the flesh I would gladly have had her, but since God has taken her away I am thankful to him." Luther, *Table Talk*, in *Luther's Works*, 54:434. See also Luther's reaction to the death of a friend and fellow pastor in Luther, *Table Talk*, in *Luther's Works*, 54:319.
- <sup>82</sup> Luther, *Table Talk*, in *Luther's Works*, 54:431. This was a favorite pun of Luther's rooted in the ambiguity of

the Latin phrase *Domini sumus*, which could mean either “we are the Lord’s” (taking *Domini* as a genitive singular) or “we are the lords” (if *Domini* is a nominative plural). See also, Tappert, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 38.

<sup>83</sup> Tappert, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 59.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 65. Luther further promised to make sure that some of the young man’s final words would be written down and sent to his grieving parents.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>90</sup> Brewer explains that in 1540 Luther permitted the practice of extreme unction provided that the gospel was clearly proclaimed, that it was not referred to as a sacrament and that it was completed without superstition. Brewer, *Luther and the Seven Sacraments*, 150.

<sup>91</sup> This line is taken from Luther’s most famous hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*.

<sup>92</sup> For the full account of Magdalene’s death, see Luther, *Table Talk*, in *Luther’s Works*, 54:428–33.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 54:430.

<sup>94</sup> Tappert, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 76.