

An All-important Lesson: How to prepare for Death.

From Luther by the Reverend H. W. Wehrs

“I. Because death is a departure from the world and all its affairs, it is necessary for a man to make arrangement for his money and property in order to remove all dispute and all mistake, that else might arise among his relations after his death.

“II. That he also take leave in a spiritual manner, i.e. that he kindly with all his heart and for the sake of God forgive all those, by whom he has been offended; and again, he, on his part, should sincerely and for the sake of God beg the pardon of all those he undoubtedly will have offended, if only by setting a bad example, or showing too little charity, which he ought to have exercised according to Christian and brotherly love, so that his soul may not be burdened by any affairs of this world.

“III. After having taken leave from all things temporal, he should turn to God to whom the way of death also turns and leads. And here the strait gate and the narrow way to life properly begins. In this a man must venture cheerfully. Although narrow, the way is not long. It is, as with a child, that is born in danger and anguish from the small habitation of its mother’s womb into this spacious world; man passes through the strait gate of death from this life into eternal life. And though we consider heaven and earth we now dwell in, as very

large and extensive, nevertheless, when compared to the future heaven, they are a great deal smaller and narrower than a mother’s womb as compared to this present heaven. Hence the dying of the beloved saints is called a new birth and the day of its commemoration is called in Latin ‘Natale’, that is, birthday. But for the narrowness of the way of death we think this life to be broad, and the life to come narrow. Therefore future life is a matter of faith, and passing from this life into future life is likened by Christ to the natural birth of a child, when saying: ‘A woman, when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come, but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish for joy, that a man is born into this world’. Thus it is with dying; anguish is the thing we are aware of, but we know that after death there will be plenty of room and great joy.

“IV. If we wish to prepare for death properly it will be incumbent upon us to confess our sins and to receive the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, to long for it devoutly, and to participate of it with great confidence, when it is to be had; if not, the longing for it shall not the less be of comfort to us, and we shall not feel alarmed if, by circumstances, we are hindered to receive it, for Christ says: ‘All things are possible to him, that believeth’. For the sacraments are but signs that serve to attract faith, as we shall see, without which faith they are of no avail to us.

“V. We should care that the holy sacraments be highly esteemed and honored with us, so that we frankly and cheerfully depend upon them and regard them superior to death, sin and hell; that we occupy our minds more with them and their virtues, than with our sins.

But how to render due honor to the sacraments we will now learn. The honor of the sacraments consists in this, that we believe to be true what they mean, and that all of God's proclamation therein pertains to us, so that we say with Mary, the mother of the Lord, Luke 1, 38: 'Be it unto me according to thy word'. For as God speaks and testifies by the minister, He may not be more dishonored in His word, than by our doubting its truth; nor may He be honored more than by our believing it to be true and by trusting in it.

"VI. To learn the efficacy of the sacraments we must know the evils they combat, and the reasons why they have been given. There are three, 1. The frightful image of death; 2. The horrible and manifold image of sin; 3. The unbearable and inevitable image of hell and damnation. Now, each of these grows strong by way of addition. Death grows strong by this, that frail and timid human nature imagines to itself too deeply its horrible image and turns its eyes but to this. In addition to this the devil is very busy in keeping before man's eyes the terrible features and image of death, in order to make him faint-hearted and despondent, for he will most likely present to him all kinds of terrible, sudden and evil deaths man has ever seen, heard or read of. Into this he will sprinkle the wrath of God and show how, at sundry times, God has punished and destroyed sinners; all this he will do to drive man into fear of death and inordinate love and care of this life, that man, burdened with such thoughts, may forget his God, flee and hate death, and thus be found disobedient in the hour of death. For the more death is feared and looked at, the harder it is to die. In life we ought to occupy our thoughts with death and

look toward it when it is yet afar off and not pressing upon us, but in the hour of death this is dangerous and vain. At that hour we must hurl from us its image and not be willing to look at it. Behold, thus death has its power and strength from the timidity of our nature and from our looking at it in the wrong time.

"VII. Sin also grows large and strong by looking at it and contemplating it too deeply. To this helps the timidity of our conscience, that dreads God and reproves us. Now the devil finds a chance he has long sought for; he presses upon us, he magnifies and multiplies our sins, he presents to us all those that have sinned, and have been damned even for a few sins, so that poor man must become faint-hearted and unwilling to die, and thus forgets God and is found disobedient towards Him at his departure, the more so, because a dying man generally thinks he ought to contemplate his sins and he was doing well in that. So then man finds himself unprepared and indisposed to die, for in the moment of death we must not look at our sins, but while we are living. But the evil spirit sets everything upside down. In death, when we should place before our eyes only life, grace and salvation, he presents to us nothing but death, sin and hell; in life when we always should keep death in view he conceals its dire image from our eyes.

"VIII. Hell grows large and strong when looked at in undue time. It grows still more so by inquisitive thoughts in regard to predestination. Here the devil begins to display his greatest skill to lead man away from the word of God to look for signs and wonders in order to become sure of his election and salvation, and to suspect God as not willing to save him. In short, he tries

to extinguish unto man the love of God as by a storm and to arouse hatred against God. Now, the more a man yields to the devil and such thoughts, the more precarious his state is: he can not longer withstand, but finally falls into hatred against God and into blasphemy. Man is said to be tempted by hell, when he is tempted by thoughts concerning his election; this is much complained of in the Psalms. Whosoever conquers in this, has conquered sin, hell and death all together.

“IX. You must take pains so as not to invite those images to your home, they will all by themselves rush in too strongly and try to claim your whole heart for their disputations and visions, and if they prevail against you, you are lost and God is forgotten. For these images are out of place in the hour of death. At such time you must expel them, when they begin to tempt you. But who wishes to subdue and expel them, will not find it sufficient to wrest and dispute with them, for they will prove too strong for him, and things will grow worse and worse. The proper art consists in dropping them altogether and not meddling with them. But how is this to be done? It is to be done in this way: You must look at death in the mirror of life; at sin in the mirror of grace; at hell in the mirror of heaven. To this image you must cling, though all creatures, all angels, yea, even God should seem to present it to you in a different way.

“X. You must not look at death as it is in itself, nor as it is in your nature, nor as it is in those, that were slain by the wrath of God, whom death has conquered, else you will be conquered like these and be lost; but you must turn away your eyes, your thoughts, your heart from all such images and look at death steadily as it is in

those that have died in the grace of God and have conquered death. You must look at death as it is in Christ and then in all his saints. Behold, presented in this image, death will not be terrible to you, but weak, conquered and swallowed by life; for Christ is nothing but life, consolation and salvation. The deeper you will press this image into your mind and the more you will look at it, the more the image of death will vanish and finally disappear, and so your heart may be at peace, and you may die in Christ cheerfully, as is said Rev. 14.: ‘Blessed are the dead, that die in the Lord’. This is signified in Num. 21. When the Israelites were bitten by fiery serpents, they were not told to wrest with them, but to look upon the serpent of brass, by so doing the fiery serpents fell off by themselves and disappeared. Thus your mind must be absorbed in the death of Christ and you will find life; but if you look at death without Christ, it will cause you great torments and trouble.

“XI. Even so, you must not look at sin as it is in sinners, nor as it is in your conscience, nor as it is in those, that finally remain in sin and are lost, else you will surely follow them and be conquered; but you must turn away your thoughts from all this, and look at sin as it is in the mirror of grace. This you must impress into your heart and keep it always in sight. The image of grace is Christ crucified, and all his saints. How is this to be understood? Answer: it is nothing but grace and mercy, that Christ crucified takes away you sins, bears them and blots them out for you; and to believe this and to keep it constantly in mind, means to look at the mirror of grace and to impress it into the heart. Further, all saints labor and suffer the same as you do, as it is written: ‘Bear ye

one another's burden', and Matth. 11.: 'Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'. Thus you may look at your sins without fear. Your sins are sins no more, but made up into one lump and swallowed in Christ; for He takes upon Him your sins, conquers them by His righteousness, from mere grace. If you believe, they will not harm you any more. Thus Christ, the mirror of grace and life, is our consolation against the image of death and sin. This Paul testifies 1 Cor. 15.: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ'.

"XII. You must not view hell, its everlasting torments and predestination in yourself, nor in them that are damned, you must not trouble yourself at the multitude of those that are not predestinated to eternal life, or else you will plunge into an abyss; close your eyes toward all this. You will not unravel the secrets of God though you try for thousands of years; you will only destroy yourself. Therefore look at the heavenly image, Christ, as descending into hell for you, as being forsaken by God for you, as one damned forever when he cried from the cross: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me'. Behold, in this image your hell is conquered and your election made sure. For if you pay attention only to this and believe, that all this has been done for your sake, you will surely be kept in faith" (*The Lutheran Witness*, Volume 9, Number 8 [21 September, 1890], pages 59-60).