

INTO YOUR HAND I COMMIT MY SPIRIT; YOU HAVE REDEEMED ME,
O LORD, FAITHFUL GOD.

Martin Luther is now 62 years old.

There was an ongoing squabble among three brothers who were counts – leaders – in the city of Mansfeld¹ -- of course, having to do with earthly property and money and power. On January 23, 1546, Luther set out for the city of Mansfeld to mediate this family feud. It was a cold German winter, and crossing the swollen, icy Salle River was difficult. On his way to Mansfeld, Luther suddenly became weak. And yet, by mid-February, Luther had helped the counts come to an agreement, and peace was restored, but Luther felt weaker still.

On Monday, February 15, Luther preached at St. Andrew's Church in Eisleben. He ended his sermon rather abruptly, as he announced to the congregation, "This and much more might be said concerning this Gospel, but I am too weak and we shall let it go at that."²

He was taken to a home across the street where he rested for the next two days. Around 10 p.m., February 17, 1546, Luther went to bed and prayed Psalm 31:5, "Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God."

When Luther died, a scrap of paper was found in his pocket. In his own handwriting, he had written in Latin and German, "We are beggars. This is true." Luther knew he had nothing to offer God -- neither physically nor spiritually.

¹ Luther's family moved to Mansfeld when he was 1. Luther left Mansfeld at the age of 14 when he went to the Latin school in Magdeburg. Luther was dealing with friends and relatives when mediating this squabble.

² AE 51:392.

Luther knew that, as a poor, miserable sinner before God, he was a poor, miserable BEGGAR. From his lectures on V. 7 of our Old Testament reading, Luther writes, “The godly . . . always feel their own imperfection, and they always long for the grace of God. We sigh and pray for the remission of sins. . . . We sin much, and therefore we need much forgiveness.”³

As Luther went to bed that night feeling ill, and perhaps even suspecting that death was near, he admitted and confessed to God that he was a sinner, and could only beg for God’s mercy. Luther was prepared for death—for he was a beggar before God and Christ was His merciful Savior.

And you are a beggar too! Before God, you bring nothing to the table—not now, not at your death. Isaiah announces, “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass” (40:6–7). And so now, and at the time of your death, God calls you to repent, “Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near . . . return to the LORD, that He may have compassion on [you]” (Isaiah 55:6–7).

Luther went to bed that night in the sure confidence of Jesus Christ. As a beggar before God, he closed his eyes in peace, knowing Isaiah’s words: “Let [the wicked] return to the LORD, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (55:7). Luther fell asleep for a few hours, content being a beggar in God’s hands, for He knew His God has mercy on the repentant, that He is full of compassion and ready to pardon! And you, too, O repentant beggar, can rest in Christ,

³ AE 17:255.

for He has compassion on you; He will abundantly pardon you, and in Him, you have peace.

At 1 AM on the night of February 18th, Luther suddenly woke up and cried out, “O Lord God, I’m in so much pain! Oh, Dear Dr. Jonas, it appears as though I shall remain here!”

In his dying hour, Luther utters John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” He recited other Scripture passages, before repeating three more times Psalm 31:5, “Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.”

What would give Luther such confidence in his hour of death? How could Luther be so bold with His judgment so near? How could Luther be so certain that he could commit his spirit to the eternal Judge? What gives you confidence and boldness in your hour of death before the eternal Judge? For Luther, it was all about Jesus—he believed that he was saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus alone—as he was convinced through the Word of God!

Perhaps, Luther’s confidence is best stated in the First Article of his 1530 Smalcald Articles, “The first and chief article is this: Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised for our justification (Romans 4:24–25). He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29), and God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all (Isaiah 53:6). . . . Upon this article everything that we teach and practice depends. . . . Therefore, we must be certain and not doubt this doctrine.”⁴

⁴ *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, Second edition (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 263.

Dear Christian, this is your Jesus; this is your God in your time of pain and distress, and even in your hour of death. Jesus Christ has redeemed you with His own blood, death, and resurrection. He paid the price for all the sins you have ever committed—the sins of your youth, the sins of your flesh, and the sins in your heart and mind. His blood, death, and resurrection continually wash over you in your Baptism, as you are marked and sealed with Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

The blood of Christ surges into your mouth, soul, and life in His own body and blood in His sacred Meal. His holy flesh and blood forgives you all your sins, tears down the wall that separates you from God, and places eternal paradise into your flesh and soul. This truth . . . this comfort . . . this gift of salvation . . . this Jesus! -- is yours now and when you close your eyes in earthly death.

The night Luther died, he prayed Psalm 31:5 four times, “Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.” Justus Jonas knew Luther’s final moments had come. He asked his friend, “Reverend Father, will you remain steadfast in Christ and the doctrine which you have preached?” Luther replied, “Ja!” “Yes.” This poor beggar was ready to die, trusting in His dear Savior. Luther died at about three in the morning of a heart attack. God delivered him out of this veil of tears. His earthly journey was over.

One of Luther’s favorite portions of Scripture was John 15, which Luther understands as describing the Christian’s life in Christ. Luther believed that Christ lives in and through the Christian. On John 15, Luther writes, “[Jesus] was sent into the world by the Father to redeem us from our sin by His suffering and death, and to reconcile us to the Father, that all

who believe in Him might not be damned and lost but have remission of sin and eternal life for His sake.”⁵

This, dear Christians, is indeed what takes place in your Baptism, and as you hear the preached Word, and as you eat and drink Christ’s body and blood. This is the Christian life -- being grafted into the life-giving Vine and bearing much fruit.

The morning of his death, Luther’s body was taken to St. Andrew’s Church. A memorial service was held that morning, and another the next morning.

Luther’s body was then draped with a white pall, and then with fifty horsemen, the 70-mile journey to Wittenberg began. The crowd grew to the thousands, and steeple bells rang from the churches. When Luther’s body arrived in Wittenberg, he was taken to the Castle Church, where twenty-nine years earlier he had nailed the 95 Theses and, there, below the pulpit, he was buried.

Luther’s pastor, Johannes Bugenhagen, preached the funeral sermon. He expressed thanksgiving to God for Luther’s many gifts to the Church, for Luther’s valiant defense of the Gospel, and for the way in which Luther unlocked the Scriptures concerning Christ. Most of all, Bugenhagen preached about Christ and how He has conquered death. Bugenhagen proclaimed that, through Christ, the death of the body was merely the beginning of life eternal through Jesus Christ, who became the sacrifice for all [sinful beggars].

⁵ AE 24:211.

Dear Christian friends, whether it be today or in our time of death — with Luther, we boldly confess our faith in Jesus Christ, “Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.” Amen.

--With thanks to Rev. Dr. James Baneck--