

And Take They Our Life

Martin Luther's Theology of Martyrdom

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Every Christian a Martyr, An Introduction

It is a great wonder that the grand moment of the devil's triumph is the precise moment of his overthrow. It is the same great wonder that the death of God is eternal life for man. Likewise, that the profound humiliation and shame of Jesus' cross is His glory and exaltation.

In the weakness of the cross God overpowers sin, death, and the devil. In the foolishness of the cross sinners are made wise unto salvation. In the suffering of Jesus we Christians are given eternal happiness. In His forsakenness we are forgiven. In His death we find life, an eternal life that never ends, that cannot end.

He lets the godly become powerless and to be brought low, until everyone supposes their end is near, whereas in these very things He is present to them with all His power, yet so hidden and in secret that even those who suffer the oppression do not feel it but only believe. There is the fullness of God's power and His outstretched arm. For where man's strength ends, God's strength begins, provided faith is present and waits on Him. And when the oppression comes to an end, it becomes manifest what great strength was hidden underneath the weakness. Even so, Christ was powerless on the cross; and yet there He performed His mightiest work and conquered sin, death, world, hell, devil, and all evil. Thus all the martyrs were strong and overcame. Thus, too, all who suffer and are oppressed overcome. Therefore it is said in Joel 3:10: "Let the weak say, 'I am strong'"—yet in faith, and without feeling it until it is accomplished. (LW 21:340, On the Magnificat, 1521)

This hidden victory of the cross extends to the Christian, who follows Christ on the way of suffering. The first cross noted in the Scriptures is the one taken up by the disciples in order to follow Jesus. Martin Luther famously understood "the holy possession of the sacred cross" as a mark of the Christian church.

They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God's Word, enduring this for the sake of Christ, Matthew 5 [:11], "Blessed are you when men persecute you on my account." They must be pious, quiet, obedient, and prepared to serve the government

and everybody with life and goods, doing no one any harm. No people on earth have to endure such bitter hate; they must be accounted worse than Jews, heathen, and Turks. In summary, they must be called heretics, knaves, and devils, the most pernicious people on earth, to the point where those who hang, drown, murder, torture, banish, and plague them to death are rendering God a service. No one has compassion on them; they are given myrrh and gall to drink when they thirst. And all of this is done not because they are adulterers, murderers, thieves, or rogues, but because they want to have none but Christ, and no other God. Wherever you see or hear this, you may know that the holy Christian church is there, as Christ says in Matthew 5 [:11-12], "Blessed are you when men revile you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." This too is a holy possession whereby the Holy Spirit not only sanctifies His people, but also blesses them. (LW 41:164-165, On the Councils and the Church, 1539)

We could fill the world with the testimony of Scripture and quotations of Luther¹ to the uncomfortable but undeniable truth that the Christian life is one of suffering. We shouldn't be surprised to see our God suffer.

Just one more, then, from Luther's Large Catechism, Lord's Prayer (Ill:65), "Therefore we who would be Christians must surely count on having the devil with all his angels and the world as our enemies and must count on their inflicting every possible misfortune and grief upon us. For where God's Word is preached, accepted or believed, and bears fruit, there the blessed holy cross will not be far away. Let nobody think that he will have peace; he must sacrifice all he has on earth—possessions, honor, house and home, wife and children, body and life."

God's Word has relentless and energetic enemies, thus the people marked with that Word share those enemies. The world, the flesh, and especially the devil bombard the kingdom of God. He was a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44), and, dear Christian, your death is his aim.

Since Luther understood the history of the world as the triumph of the cross and the preached world over the kingdom of the devil, he recognized every Christian as a martyr. The Christian "lets anyone who will rob, take, cheat, scrape, devour, and rage—for the Christian is a martyr on earth" (LW 46:40).

With Luther, then, there was no "theology of the martyrs," per se, but a theology of the Gospel, a theology of the suffering of God, a theology of the crushing of the serpent's head with the Messiah's crushed heel, the Biblical theology that binds up the life and death of the Christian to the death and life of Christ. For Luther, martyrdom was the "pattern of the true Christian life" (LW 32:266)!

So the Lord says to Jeremiah (Jer. 1:18): "I shall make your face iron so that you do not care who attacks it." And really, the office of teaching in the church requires such a mind that despises all dangers. In general, all the devout should prepare themselves so that they are not afraid of becoming martyrs, that is, confessors or witnesses of God. Christ does not want to hide in the world, but He wants to be preached, "not between four walls but from the roof" (Matt. 10:27), so that the Gospel shines in the world like a torch on a high mountain or on a watchtower. (LW 12:383-384, On Psalm 51:12, 1533)

The Christian treasures the Word of God above all things. God's Word endures forever, and with and through that Word we will also endure the judgment and come to eternal life. Faith clings to the Word of God; we hold onto the Word more tightly than we even hold our own lives. "Those who regard this light as a treasure hold all glory of the flesh to be nothing. This is what we see in the martyrs. By comparison with the Word they spurned all things" (LW 17:312, On Isaiah 60:1, c. 1529).

Luther put the martyrs before us as examples of faith at work. Distinct from the practice of the Middle Ages, Luther extolled the martyrs not as champions of good works, but champions of faith. It is the Spirit and the Word at work in the life, the preaching, the suffering, and the blessed deaths of the martyrs. They were, first of all, "witnesses" to the Gospel.

Faith cannot hold its tongue. The Christian knows that the devil will attack the world, but it is impossible that the heart overflowing with the Lord's mercy would not spill over through the Christian's conversation.

If I earnestly believe that Christ is true God and that He became our Savior, I will never deny this but will proclaim it publicly against the Turks, the world, the pope, the Jews, and all the sects; and I will confess that it is true. I would rather forfeit my life or jeopardize property and honor than disavow this. Wherever faith is genuine, it cannot hold its tongue; it would rather suffer death. Such faith will also confess God's Word before tyrants. To be sure, it will encounter all sorts of

trials and temptations from the devil, as the martyrs amply experienced. (LW 22:393, On John 3:19, c. 1537)

It is not only that the martyrs are attacked and murdered, it is that they willingly let themselves be attacked and murdered. This is the fruit of faith, that overwhelming confidence in the promises of God. "For where there is such faith and confidence there is also a bold, defiant, fearless heart that risks all and stands by the truth, no matter what the cost, whether it is against pope or king, as we see that the dear martyrs did. For such a heart is satisfied and serenely sure that it has a gracious, kindly-disposed God" (LW 44:112, Treatise on Good Works, 1520). Faith gives us the confidence to suffer and the freedom to die, knowing that we have already passed from death to life (see John 5:24).

The martyrs also face their suffering with courage and joy. We'll consider this extensively below in the section on Saints Agnes and Agatha, two of Luther's favorite martyrs. Note here, though, that confidence in the Lord's Word makes the suffering of the saints and martyrs seem like child's play, as Luther noted from his reading of Vincent².

In this one way St. Stephen, St. Lawrence, Sebastian, Fabian, and men like them overcame death and all tortures. Because they kept the faith of Abraham and comforted themselves with these visible signs of grace, all tortures—as an often repeated statement of Vincent puts it—were amusement, pastime, and,

² Saint Vincent of Lérins (died c. 445), was a Gallic monk.

so to speak, child's play for them. (LW 3:125, On Genesis 17:8, c. 1539)

The martyrs had courage, joy, and spunk. They had sass. I think Luther found a special comfort in the boldness of the martyrs who would contradict tyrants and mock their accusers. They did not shrink back to destruction but were bold to the salvation of their souls. They were not intimidated or coerced, they were emboldened and free. "We read that the holy martyrs treated the tyrants and their cruel raging and raving with scorn despite all kinds of pain and torture. Even the young virgins mocked them and rejoiced in torment and suffering, as though they were about to go to a dance" (LW 24:138, On John 14:20, c. 1537). This boldness infuriated the devil.

Satan is an angry adversary. He does not worry much about thoughts. Something must be found in you which will prove too strong for him. This was apparent in the martyrs. How bold they were, what spirit and courage they displayed when they confronted the judges, fully aware that life and limb, honor and goods were at stake! Such conduct calls for consolation, not for a mere thought. It must be a matter of the heart that a person can face death and every trial cheerfully and say: "Honor, goods, life and limb, and all that is earthly, begone! I am determined to remain here, right here!" Then it will become manifest whether or not a person is a Christian and remains constant by means of his thoughts. (LW 23:145, On John 6:56, c. 1531)

Faith is mocking the devil. These are not two different acts, but one and the same, two sides of the same coin. Believing the Lord is disbelieving the great liar. Trusting God is despising Satan.

We will turn the tables on him and learn to mock both the devil and the world. Then we will laugh gleefully at them, not they at us. The skill with which they want to make us sad, angry, and impatient will fail them; and they will consume themselves, together with their hatred and wrath; and when they see us, they will suffer great agony. They will see that we remain cheerful through it all and scorn them when they attempt to vent their anger on us so vehemently. (LW 24:277, On John 15:19, c. 1537)

This confident, joyful, bold suffering of death looks like madness to the world (and even to our own flesh), but it is a fruit of the Spirit.

In this way the godly are filled with the Holy Spirit, so that they cannot keep from breaking forth into thanksgiving, confession, glorifying God, and teaching and proclaiming the Word of the Gospel.

The apostles and the martyrs were like this when they were drunk with the Holy Spirit. For a vine of this kind is very choice, and concerning it Wisdom says in Prov. 9:5: "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Then you will drink and become drunk, but with spiritual drunkenness."

Thus I understand this passage to mean that in Christ and in the time of Christ we must become drunk on the abundance of His house (cf. Ps. 36:8); that is, we are to receive the Holy Spirit from the Word and hearing. This causes us to become other men, just as an inebriated man conducts himself far differently from one who is fasting and famished. For the former laughs, rejoices, exults, sings, and shouts for joy; the latter snarls and is sad and full of complaints. (LW 8:249, On Genesis 49:12, c. 1545)

The Christian is an "other man", laughing at death, rejoicing in suffering, shouting for joy through the troubles of this life, and overcoming the devil with an unintimidated faith and an insurmountable joy.

To our great wonder, the Lord continues to overthrow the devil in the overthrow of the Christian. The blood of the martyrs is truly the seed of the Church, because the Word which the devil so furiously attacks is the Sword of the Spirit by which he is overthrown.

The foot of Christ is the saints, like the apostles and martyrs, through whom He crushed the world. ["You will walk on the asp and the basilisk; and you shall trample the lion and the dragon under foot" (Ps. 91:13)]. But that trampling could only be accomplished through the sufferings and blood of martyrs. Then the world was perfectly despised, when even unto death they did not give in to it and thus through blood were superior to it, as long as it could not achieve what it wanted. (LW 10:340, On Psalm 68:23, c. 1515)

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If we believe, then if death must be faced, or if plague, hunger, war, and all the fury of the devil and hell assail, we, too, should say: "I could defecate on you, devil, etc." This is certainly how the church believes, and it still displays the same stoutheartedness. (LW 8:255, On Genesis 49:12, c. 1545)

In this essay we'll look at Luther's treatment of the martyrs. First, we'll consider his letter of comfort to the church in Bremen as they mourned the murder of their pastor. Second, we'll let Luther preach to us using the examples of the young martyrs Agnes and Agatha. Finally, we'll draw several pastoral conclusions.

The Burning of Brother Henry: An Evangelical Approach to Martyrdom

n December 4, 1524, an Augustinian Friar from Zutphen, Netherlands, mounted the pulpit in Meldorf, a village in the region of Dithmarschen in northern Germany. Henry was 36. He had studied in Wittenberg and embraced the Reformation doctrine. His master's theses were a defense of the doctrine of justification.

He had been preaching for some time in Antwerp, but was arrested and exiled. As he was on his way to Wittenberg, he passed through Bremen. There, the people asked him to preach, and after they heard him, called him to be their pastor. He labored there for two years, and the Reformation doctrine came to that region through his work.

The people in a neighboring region, Dithmarschen, heard of his preaching and asked if he could come there and preach to them

as well. He agreed, and in December of 1524 made his way to Meldorf. Those opposing the Gospel flew into a rage. They bustled around, attempting to prevent his preaching, but they failed. Henry was in the pulpit preaching to the people on the Gospel lesson for *Populus Zion*, the second Sunday in Advent. The people loved hearing him preach the Word of God with such clarity that they asked for another sermon that day. He preached twice again on Tuesday (St. Nicholas' Day, December 6) and twice on the Day of the Conception of Mary (December 8). The people asked him to stay through Christmas and preach two times a day every day.

Henry's opposition worked quickly. They worried openly that if he had time to preach, or if he had even time to defend himself in court, the people who heard him would be converted. They had sent monks to disrupt his preaching when he was in Bremen, and not only had they failed to disrupt him; many were converted. They wanted to avoid that here.

A mob was gathered, about 500 men, who were armed and drunk. They set up a roadblock and proceeded to Meldorf. They attacked the parsonage, beat the pastor, captured Brother Henry, binding his hands behind his back, and drove him barefoot to Hemmingstedt (about five miles away). There they deposed him briefly, but as he answered kindly, the people shouted, "Away with him!" afraid that he might gain sympathy because of his answers.

He was driven another five miles to Heide. He asked for a horse to ride being weary, and walking this distance over the frozen road with no shoes and, according to one source, no clothes. They mocked. "Are we supposed to keep a stable for heretics." In the early morning of December 11, a council was assembled in the

square of Heide. Henry was accused of teaching against Mary and the Church and sentenced to be burned. They began to beat and stab Henry. He prayed, "Lord forgive them, for they know not what they do. Thy name alone is holy, O heavenly Father!" (LW 32:385)

All this time they were trying to light the fire to burn Henry, but they could not get it lit. The beating continued with pikes, maces, and other weapons. They tied him to a ladder so they could place him on the fire. Henry began to confess the creed, but they struck him in the face, and then tied his neck to the ladder so tightly that he could not speak, blood running from his mouth and nose. They lifted the ladder, but it fell to the side, and a halberd went through Henry.

Henry was still alive through so many wounds, and the mob was still unable to light the fire, so they at last killed him with repeated blows to the chest with a mace. His body was roasted over the coals.

Henry of Zutphen, age 36, martyred on December 11, 1524 in Heide, Germany. We'll meet him in the resurrection.



When we think of the great Christian martyrs we think of the ancient world, of the pagan Roman emperors demanding the Christian's worship. The worst of all Christian persecutions, the appropriately named "Great Persecution" under Diocletian (begun in 303) ended with the Edict of Milan (313). This marked the end of official persecution, and the beginning of a martyr-less millennium (at least in the West).

But martyrdom was reborn in the Reformation.

Luther was certainly paying attention to this trend. He was outlawed at the Diet of Worms, and condemned to die for his teaching. He expected to be martyred. He knew of others.

However, John and Henry at Brussels, who were the first martyrs, also became two shining lights through their radiant death, being sacrificed to God as a fragrant offering [Eph. 5:2]. Also among these martyrs belong Caspar Tauber, burned to death in Vienna, and George Buchführer, who was put to death in Hungary.⁵ More recently I have heard of still another who was burned at the stake in Prague in Bohemia for leaving his monastic order of impure chastity and entering the order of pure chastity, the holy estate of matrimony. (LW 32:266)

But, Luther notes, "The one who shines most brightly among all these saints is surely your Henry of Zutphen" (LW 32:266).

Henry was martyred in Germany, less than 300 miles from Wittenberg. He was a student and friend of Luther's and the Wittenbergers. This was close to home.

Luther learned of Henry's death through a letter from Jacob Probst, and wrote a letter of consolation to the congregation in Bremen, comforting them at the death of their pastor.³ This letter had three parts: (1) a letter of comfort to the congregation in

^{3 &}quot;The Burning of Brother Henry" is found in Luther's Works 32:261-286. It was also translated in the Philadelphia Edition of Luther's Works without the exposition of Psalm 9. The text and audio of that earlier translation are available here: www.wolfmueller.co/henry.

Bremen, (2) a short exposition of Psalm 9, and (3) the history of Henry, with a detailed account of his death.

Luther's letter gives us tremendous insight into an evangelical approach to martyrdom. We'll consider Luther's letter together, and see what wisdom there is for us. I commend this courage and comfort filled text to you.

Consider Luther's opening argument:

For not only do we have, hear, and read the pure Word of God and see it rise like the very sun in its brightness, but we also sense the presence of the Spirit of God and experience how He demonstrates and confirms His Word with great and mighty deeds, as has been His custom from the beginning. Above all, He has given us brave and bold hearts, so that in many places both preachers and hearers are daily being added to the number of the saints. Some have shed their blood, others have suffered imprisonment, others again have been driven from their homes, but all of them endure the shame of the cross of Christ [Heb. 12:2]. In our day the pattern of the true Christian life has reappeared, terrible in the world's eyes, since it means suffering and Persecution, but precious and priceless in God's sight. As the Psalter puts it [Ps. 116:15], "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints," and again in Ps. 72[:14], "Precious is their blood in His sight." (LW 32:265-266)

First, Luther begins with the Christian premise that the Lord is working, busy, and active in the church. Jesus ascended into heaven not to sit idly by, but to govern all things for the sake of

His body, the church. Consider the object of Luther's sentences. It is the Holy Spirit who "demonstrates and confirms His Word." "He has given us brave and bold hearts." The martyrdom of Brother Henry was not an indication that the Lord has lost control. Quite the opposite: the martyrs are the Lord's way of governing the church.

Second, martyrdom is ordinary. Luther calls it "the pattern of the true Christian life suffering and persecution." "The Christian is a martyr," Luther says (*Admonition to Peace*, 1525, LW 46:39).

Luther considered the holy cross to be a mark of the church, noting in *On the Councils and the Church:*

Seventh, the holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God's Word, enduring this for the sake of Christ, Matthew 5 [:11], "Blessed are you when men persecute you on my account." (LW 41:164-165, 1539)

Luther knew that "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). Persecution and death are the Christian life.

There was a theology of suffering in the monastery, a theology of the cross, but it was a self-inflicted suffering to purge sin and earn God's favor. Luther and the other monks would beat and whip themselves, expose themselves to the cold, and endure extended fasts, torturing themselves toward purity. When the Gospel became clear Luther realized that this excessive affliction was not helpful, and even blasphemous. He understood the benefit of moderate discipline in humbling fleshly desires but recognized that the chief affliction of the Christian comes from outside. We don't afflict ourselves to be holy. The world, the flesh, and the devil afflict us because the blood of Jesus has already made us holy.

We don't need to whip ourselves, the devil does that for us.

Third, martyrdom is noble. The martyrs are heroes. They were courageous. Their sufferings and deaths are great feats accomplished in the name of Christ. Those who suffer for the Word of God are doing "great and mighty deeds."

Luther, here, is picking up on the pattern of great works put forth in Hebrews, where time failed to tell of the saints

who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong

⁴ Consider this passage from Luther's sermon on John 14:1, "I myself was a monk for twenty years. I tortured myself with prayers, fasting, vigils, and freezing; the frost alone might have killed me. It caused me pain such as I will never inflict on myself again, even if I could. What else did I seek by doing this but God, who was supposed to note my strict observance of the monastic order and my austere life? I constantly walked in a dream and lived in real idolatry. For I did not believe in Christ; I regarded Him only as a severe and terrible Judge, portrayed as seated on a rainbow. Therefore I cast about for other intercessors, Mary and various other saints, also my own works and the merits of my order. And I did all this for the sake of God, not for money or goods. Nevertheless, this was heresy and idolatry, since I did not know Christ and did not seek in and through Him what I wanted." (LW 24:24, c. 1537)

out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.(Hebrews 11:33-38)

Notice the intensification of the work: conquering kingdoms, shutting lions' mouths, made to be mighty warriors, the dead raised! And then there is a stunning shift: mocking, flogging, chains, prison, stoning, being cut in half, killed. It is amazing to see "being raised from the dead" and "being put to death" on the same list of heroic works, but so it is with the Christian. We are destitute, afflicted, mistreated, dragged all over the earth, and this is not our shame. It is our glory. The world is not worthy of such suffering saints.

This is a particular mark of the Kingdom of God. The great and heroic deeds in this kingdom are the works of confession and suffering. Following the pattern of Jesus, the Christian is ready to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from the confession of Christ's holy name.

There is an important note here about heroes. I once heard someone say, "You can learn everything you need to about a person if you know who their heroes are." This is tremendously insightful, and important for our Christian life. Who are our heroes? Who do we look up to, admire, and seek to emulate?

Jesus is much more than our hero, but He also fills that role. And Jesus suffered and died.

The martyrs are the Christian heroes. They are the ones who confessed the faith with their words and their life. This was the case in the ancient world, and it is no different for the reformers.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit strengthens the hearts of Christians to endure suffering and death. We will especially consider this in Luther's treatment of Agnes and Agatha. The Holy Spirit, wrote Luther, "has given us brave and bold hearts, so that in many places both preachers and hearers are daily being added to the number of the saints. Some have shed their blood "Bravery and boldness to confess the name of Jesus no matter the cost, this is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

"No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). The difficulty in saying "Jesus is Lord" in not in the pronunciation, but in the source and the consequence. Our hearts are full of unbelief; only the Holy Spirit converts and gives us faith. But more than this: confessing Christ is costly. The martyrs of the early church were required to say, "Caesar is Lord." When they refused, when they confessed, "Jesus, and Jesus alone, is Lord," they were fed to the lions or tied to the burning stake. This is why the confession of the name of Jesus is so difficult, and why bravery and boldness are needed in the Christian heart.

Fifth, by the Holy Spirit, the Christian recognizes the glory of God in the suffering of the cross.

One of the ways the devil assaults our faith is by "turning our glory into shame" (Psalm 4:2). God's most precious gifts, Jesus, His blood, suffering, and death, His Word and the life that He gives, seem small, insignificant, even shameful. We glory in our strength, our accomplishments, our riches. . Our boasting belongs in our baptism, our glory in suffering for the name of Jesus. The devil tempts us to be ashamed of these things.

Luther flipped this on its head. Remember:

.... the true Christian life has reappeared, terrible in the world's eyes, since it means suffering and Persecution, but precious and priceless in God's sight. As the Psalter puts it [Ps. 116:15], "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints," and again in Ps. 72[:14], "Precious is their blood in His sight." (LW 32:266)

By the Holy Spirit we see the blood and death of the martyrs as precious and priceless in God's eyes.

One of the themes running through Luther's work is the contrast of vision. The Lord does not see as we do. There are earthly eyes and spiritual eyes. Regarding the sufferings of the Christian, and especially regarding the death of the martyrs, the world and the Lord look through very different eyes.

Consider this distinction that Luther puts before us:

In our day the pattern of the true Christian life has reappeared, terrible in the world's eyes, since it means suffering and Persecution, but precious and priceless in God's sight. As the Psalter puts it [Ps. 116:15], "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints," and again in Ps. 72[:14], "Precious is their blood in His sight."

Luther's words train us to look at the world through the eyes of God.

Sixth, then, we see the sufferings of the Christians and the death of the martyrs as the Lord's work to "demonstrate and confirm His Word." False teaching is overthrown by the martyr's death. The martyrs' deaths were part of God's timing, God's work of sustaining the church and the preaching of the pure Gospel.

Seventh, not only did the martyrs confirm the truth of their preaching, their blood also fights against error.

Here's another paragraph from Luther's account of Henry's martyrdom:

These men and others like them are the ones who, with their own blood, will drown the papacy and its god, the devil. These are the ones too who will preserve the Word of God in its truth and purity against the impure profaners of the Word, the new false prophets, who just now are springing up and spreading everywhere. It is doubtless out of grace that God allows them to die and shed their blood just at this time, when so many falsehoods and factions are arising, so that He may warn us and through them certify that that [doctrine] is the right doctrine wherein the right Spirit is given, which [is the doctrine] they taught, believed, died for, and by their martyrdom confirmed; just as the holy martyrs long ago died for the sake

of the Gospel and with their blood sealed and certified it for us. (LW 32:266)

Here we see Luther's evangelical approach to martyrdom. There was a danger in the old accounts of the martyrs to see their death as purifying, even salvific, as if the martyrs were earning their own salvation. Luther knew that the only blood that could wash away sin was the blood of the Lamb, the blood of Jesus. The blood of the martyrs "seals and certifies" the preaching of the Gospel.

Now, Luther knew that some people had died for error, not for the truth. These are not true martyrs, but rather the "devil's martyrs", a German proverb frequently used by Luther. In fact, there is an important and helpful distinction made by St. Augustine on this point. "Men are made martyrs not by the amount of their suffering, but by the cause in which they suffer."⁵

Those who were killed for preaching the Gospel were, in fact, confirming this preaching. In this passage we hear echoes of Tertullian's famous remark, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" (*Apologeticus*, Chapter 50). Luther knew this saying. It had already become something of a proverb.

Commenting on Psalm 23:5, Luther notes:

The more the devil and the world plague and torture [the Christian church], the better she fares. For her betterment and growth come in persecution, suffering, and dying. Therefore

⁵ St. Augustine, Letter 68, To Festus, 2. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf101.vii.1.LXXXIX. html (accessed 1/10/19). Luther knew this wisdom from Augustine, and applied it to Zwingli. See LW 16:103, 38:303.

one of the old fathers has said: "The blood of the martyrs is a seed." Where one is executed, a hundred others rise again. Of this wonderful victory several psalms sing; for example, the ninth, the tenth, and others. (LW 12:174, c. 1537)

Far from diminishing the church, the death of the martyrs expanded the kingdom of God.

Eighth, this understanding of martyrdom as God's gracious provision for the church informs the reaction of the mourning Christians in Bremen to the murder of their pastor. Luther encouraged them not to mourn for Henry, nor to be angry with the murderers, but to be thankful, and to understand that Henry's martyrdom would be a blessing to those in Dithmarschen.

Here's what Luther wrote, stunning both in its theology and pastoral application:

That way I can admonish your hearts in Christ not to grieve, or to speak ill of his murderers in Dithmarschen, but rather to be glad, and thank and praise God who has made you worthy to see and obtain these His wonders and gifts of grace. His murderers have already been repaid enough and more than enough by staining their hands so terribly with innocent blood and heaping upon themselves such great and awful guilt in the sight of God. There is really far more reason to weep and lament for them than for the sainted Henry, and to pray that not only they, but the whole land of Dithmarschen, may be converted and come to the knowledge of the truth. It is to be expected confidently that this will indeed be the fruit of Henry's

martyrdom, especially since many in that region are even now turning eagerly to the Gospel and are sorry that such a murder was committed among them. For God, who allowed the sainted Henry to suffer there, surely has it in mind not only to punish the godless if they do not repent, but to use this murder for the benefit of many in that land and by it lead them to eternal life. (LW 32:267-268)

Moses taught us that "'Vengeance is Mine' says the Lord" (Deuteronomy 32:35). Paul, too, instructed this: "Leave room for wrath" (Romans 12:19). Just as the Lord was working in Henry's martyrdom, so the Lord will work out justice and mercy in the wake of that murder. The Christian work is to recognize the work of God, give thanks for it, and love their neighbor.

Ninth, one of the themes that develops in the accounts of the martyrs is the mercy they have for their murderers. Jesus prayed from the cross, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). St. Stephen, the first martyr, prayed "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" (Acts 7:60). We see time and again this absolution on the lips of the martyrs, including Henry's.

Thereupon, an announcement was made that all who had assisted in his capture should march out with their weapons to the fire. The gray or barefoot friars were also on hand, encouraging the wretched creatures. They said, "Now you are doing the thing right," all the time baiting these poor, miserable, drunken people. Then they took Henry and bound him, neck and feet and hands, and led him away with loud shouts to the

fire. A woman who was standing in her doorway saw them pass by and began to weep bitterly at this pitiable sight. The good Henry said to her, "Dear woman, do not weep for me!" [Luke 23:28]. When he came to the place where the fire had been prepared, he sat down on the ground completely exhausted. Then came the magistrate, Schoesser Maes, who, as it is credibly reported, was bribed to take this part. He condemned Brother Henry to the fire, pronouncing sentence in these words, "This scoundrel has preached against the Mother of God and against the Christian faith, wherefore, on behalf of my gracious lord, the bishop of Bremen, I condemn him to the fire." Brother Henry replied, "I have not done this, nevertheless, thy will be done, O Lord!" [Luke 22:42]. And lifting his eyes to heaven, he said, "Lord forgive them, for they know not what they do [Luke 23:34]. Thy name alone is holy, O heavenly Father!" (LW 32:285)

If Henry died with mercy for his murderers, then surely those who mourn for Henry can have mercy as well. Through prayer and thanksgiving, faith replaces rage in their hearts.

Luther then commends Psalm 9 to the Christians in Bremen.

For this reason I ask, indeed in this case I command, that you sing and read the Ninth Psalm, which is indeed most appropriate here. It teaches us not to grieve because of the suffering of the martyrs but rather to praise God joyfully for the fruits which He produces on earth through their martyrdom. I certainly do not mind taking the time to explain this psalm

briefly to you and to sing it with you, knowing that you are present with me in spirit. (LW 32:268)

What can we learn here from Pastor Luther? First, he turned the people's attention to the Word of God. Second, he did this before telling them of Henry's brutal death. Third, Luther knew that everything was sanctified by the Word of God and prayer (1 Timothy 4:5), so he brought both to the people to bless and sanctify then. Fourth, he read Psalm 9 like a Christian.⁶

Consider a few of Luther's comments. These are glorious.

9:1. I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart: I will tell of all thy wonderful deeds.

These wonderful deeds are, as we shall see later, that God overpowers and converts the world, not by force but through the blood and death of His saints. He overcomes the living through the dying and the dead. This is an amazing victory.

9:9. The Lord is a stronghold for the poor, a stronghold in times of trouble.

Even if He permits us to be assaulted and some to be killed, He still shields them spiritually and gives them courage so that they do not fear but rather overcome death. Furthermore He

⁶ This is a bigger topic waiting to be explored, but Luther rightly understood that the Old Testament is a Christian's book, that the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, and especially the doctrine of justification are explicitly taught by the prophets. Luther's robust treatment of the Psalms strikes our ears as foreign because we assume the Christian's doctrines are "concealed" in the Old Testament

makes it evident that we are not all killed, as the godless might wish. His remnant remains forever and even increases.

9:10. And those who know thy name put their trust in thee, for thou, O Lord, hast not forsaken those that seek thee.

God's promise gives us great boldness and comfort, for He assures us that He will not leave those who seek him. These are the people who hold fast to His Word where His name and work are acknowledged and praised, and who do not rely on their own deeds and name as do the work-righteous.

9:12. For He who avenges blood is mindful of them; He does not forget the cry of the afflicted.

He lets the godless kill and spill blood, and acts as if He had forgotten the afflicted. But He remembers them mightily and sees to it that their blood is avenged. Thus, the more the godless spill blood the greater will become the number of believers and the smaller their own number. (LW 32:269-270)

The kingdom of God is established by the blood and suffering of Jesus, and it is expanded by the blood and suffering of Christians. Luther knew this, he preached this, and he comforted and encouraged with truth. "Encourage" is probably the most important word here. Luther knew that the Christian life of suffering required courage, steadfastness. His comments on Psalm 9 end with this encouragement:

May God strengthen them and all of you and grant you grace to hold fast to the doctrine sealed by Henry's blood and, if God should demand it, to follow gladly in His footsteps. Amen. All our brethren greet you in Christ. Pray for us. The grace of God be with you. Amen. (LW 32:272)

After the exposition of Psalm 9, Luther told the story of the life and death of Brother Henry.

The narrative of Henry's arrest and death brought to light what Luther saw as the chief argument at the time: would the Romanists debate the Scripture?

There was a conspiracy to murder Henry *before* he could preach and *without* a trial. Henry's murderers knew that if people heard him preach, they would be converted.

We'll pick up a few of the sentences as Luther develops this theme.

Even when Henry was still preaching in Bremen the Roman opponents sent monks to disrupt his preaching, and they came away believing what he said.

Meanwhile the papists were not idle but sent their younger clergy every day to his services, in order to entangle him in his words. But God showed His marvelous power and converted some of them, so that a majority of the younger clergy they sent admitted that such doctrine and preaching were the truth and were from God, which no one could oppose. They added that they had never in their lives heard such teaching from any man. (LW 32:276)

As Henry was preparing to preach in Meldorf, the enemies of the Word were plotting against him.

Eventually they decided that above everything they must not let Henry preach. For if he were to preach so that the common man heard him, their deceit would surely be exposed and the game would be up. (LW 32:278)

After receiving a letter indicating that Henry was not to preach, the pastor of the congregation in Meldorf responded that

neither he [the pastor in Meldorf] nor Henry had any intention of fomenting trouble. They merely wanted to teach the pure and uncorrupted Word of God. And he offered to defend his and Brother Henry's cause against all accusers. In addition he humbly requested them not to trust the monks who, compelled by hatred and greed, were seeking to suppress the truth, and he asked them not to condemn the Word of God, but first of all to search out the truth very thoroughly and to condemn no one unheard. If they were found to be in the wrong, they were ready to take their punishment. This offer, together with the testimony, was ignored. (LW 32:280)

There was a plan to begin writing against Henry, but this was opposed on the grounds that arguing with Henry would risk more people being converted.

"No, you will have to do it some other way. If you begin writing to the heretic, he will reply, and as sure as you live you will be drawn into the same heresy, before you even know it. For when he begins to speak, it is impossible for anyone to hold out against him." Then they decided that he must be captured secretly by night and burned at once at the stake, before it became known to the people and before he could even open his mouth. This plan pleased all of them very much, especially the gray monks. (LW 32:282)

Henry, with his dying breaths, attempted to confess the creed, but even this preaching had to be silenced.

Then the good martyr of Christ began to recite the Creed. But somebody struck him in the mouth with his fist and told him to burn first; he could recite whatever he wanted to afterwards. Then somebody stood with one foot on his chest and tied him by his neck to a rung of the ladder so tightly that his mouth and nose began to bleed. He wanted to strangle him, since he saw that in spite of his many wounds he was unable to die. (LW 32:286)

Martyrdom, then, was a matter of doctrine, a matter of teaching. The devil's murder of the saints is an attempt to silence the voice of the Gospel preached.

In Luther's mind, martyrdom fit in the great contest of the Reformation, a contest between the preaching of the pure Word of God and its enemies. Through Henry's blood and suffering, the Gospel was preached. And, through Luther's publication of his death, the Gospel was preached.

Now when Almighty God saw that the time had come for the good Henry to bear witness with his blood to the truth he had proclaimed, He sent him into the midst of the murderers whom He had raised up for this purpose. (LW 32:276)

Luther ended his treatment of the burning of Brother Henry with this benediction:

May God strengthen them and all of you and grant you grace to hold fast to the doctrine sealed by Henry's blood and, if God should demand it, to follow gladly in his footsteps. Amen. All our brethren greet you in Christ. Pray for us. The grace of God be with you. Amen. (LW 32:272)

We, too, have the Gospel. We, too, know that God forgives our sins. We, too, know that Jesus is preparing a place for us, that He has us as His own people, that eternal life is sure, that His promises stand. We know that to live is Christ and to die is gain. We know that we are set in this world to suffer; that we, like Jesus, have enemies who hate us. We, too, are ready to bleed with Henry, to die with the martyrs.

Dancing to Death: Saints Agnes and Agatha and the Humble Fearlessness of Faith

Saints Agnes and Agatha were two of Luther's favorite martyrs. Agnes was born in Rome in 291 to a wealthy Christian family. She was a beautiful young girl. Many of the men of Rome sought her, but she refused, committed to prayer and study of the Scripture. Rebuffed, these men reported her to the authorities as a Christian. She was dragged naked through the streets, forced to live in a brothel for a month, and then beheaded in a spectacle.

The account of her martyrdom was made especially famous by Jerome, who prefaced his treatise *On Virginity* with this account. This essay was written in 377 in Rome. We here include the entire section for two reasons: first, because of its moving beauty, and second, to provide a taste of the more reasonable martyrologies which Luther would have studied.

And my task begins favourably, that since to-day is the birthday of a virgin, I have to speak of virgins, and the treatise has its beginning from this discourse. It is the birthday of a martyr, let us offer the victim. It is the birthday of St. Agnes, let men admire, let children take courage, let the married be astounded, let the unmarried take an example. But what can I say worthy of her whose very name was not devoid of bright praise? In devotion beyond her age, in virtue above nature, she seems to me to have borne not so much a human name, as a token of martyrdom, whereby she showed what she was to be.

But I have that which may assist me. The name of virgin is a title of modesty. I will call upon the martyr, I will proclaim the virgin. That panegyric is long enough which needs no elaboration, but is within our grasp. Let then labour cease, eloquence be silent. One word is praise enough. This word old men and young and boys chant. No one is more praiseworthy than He who can be praised by all. There are as many heralds as there are men, who when they speak proclaim the martyr.

She is said to have suffered martyrdom when twelve years old. The more hateful was the cruelty, which spared not so tender an age, the greater in truth was the power of faith which found evidence even in that age. Was there room for a wound in that small body? And she who had no room for the blow of the steel had that wherewith to conquer the steel. But maidens of that age are unable to bear even the angry looks of parents, and are wont to cry at the pricks of a needle as though they were wounds. She was fearless under the cruel hands of the executioners, she was unmoved by the heavy weight of the creaking chains, offering her

whole body to the sword of the raging soldier, as yet ignorant of death, but ready for it. Or if she were unwillingly hurried to the altars, she was ready to stretch forth her hands to Christ at the sacrificial fires, and at the sacrilegious altars themselves, to make the sign of the Lord the Conqueror, or again to place her neck and both her hands in the iron bands, but no band could enclose such slender limbs.

A new kind of martyrdom! Not yet of fit age for punishment but already ripe for victory, difficult to contend with but easy to be crowned, she filled the office of teaching valour while having the disadvantage of youth. She would not as a bride so hasten to the couch, as being a virgin she joyfully went to the place of punishment with hurrying step, her head not adorned with plaited hair, but with Christ. All wept, she alone was without a tear. All wondered that she was so readily prodigal of her life, which she had not yet enjoyed, and now gave up as though she had gone through it. Every one was astounded that there was now one to bear witness to the Godhead, who as yet could not, because of her age, dispose of herself. And she brought it to pass that she should be believed concerning God, whose evidence concerning man would not be accepted. For that which is beyond nature is from the Author of nature.

What threats the executioner used to make her fear him, what allurements to persuade her, how many desired that she would come to them in marriage! But she answered: "It would be an injury to my spouse to look on any one as likely to please me. He who chose me first for Himself shall receive me. Why are you delaying, executioner? Let this body perish which can be loved by

eyes which I would not." She stood, she prayed, she bent down her neck. You could see the executioner tremble, as though he himself had been condemned, and his right hand shake, his face grow pale, as he feared the peril of another, while the maiden feared not for her own. You have then in one victim a twofold martyrdom, of modesty and of religion. She both remained a virgin and she obtained martyrdom.⁷

Agnes of Rome, age 12, martyred on January 21, 304, in the Great Persecution of Diocletian. We'll meet her in the resurrection.

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Agatha was born in Sicily in 231. Like Agnes, it is thought that Agatha was born to a wealthy Christian family, and, at a young age, took a vow of virginity, committing her life to prayer and study of the Scriptures. (Luther understood Agatha to be an example of how the monasteries had begun well, as schools of the Scriptures.) A certain Quintianus, provost of Sicily, desired to marry her, both for her beauty and her wealth. He brought Agatha to make a sacrifice to idols, but she refused. Here begin an escalating series of tortures, first to convert, and then to destroy Agatha.

Her story, like many of the martyrs, is told in *The Golden Legend*, a wildly popular collection first published around 1260. These accounts are full of miracles accomplished by the martyrs in

⁷ Jerome, On Martyrdom, 2:5-9. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.iv.vii.ii.html (accessed 1/10/19)

life and in death, and the collection carries with it all the piety of the cult of the saints that was so roundly criticized by Luther and the other reformers.⁸ But these accounts were popular, and would have been one of Luther's sources for these stories.

To get a feel for the medieval martyrologies, and to fill in some of the details of Agatha's martyrdom, we'll let *The Golden Legend*⁹ take up the story. (Like the reformers, we'll cut out a lot of the legendary stuff.)

When [Quintianus] saw her firm in her purpose, he put her in the keeping of a woman named Aphrodisia, which had nine daughters, over foul, like unto the mother. This did he for to induce St. Agatha to do his will within thirty days.

^{8 &}quot;In the papacy there is a book containing the legends or accounts of the saints. I hate it intensely, solely for the reason that it tells of revolting forms of worship and silly miracles performed by idle people. These legends and accounts actually accomplish only one thing: they increase contempt of the government and of the household, yes, even almost of the church itself. Therefore such tales should be shunned and utterly rejected, for the chief thing of Christian doctrine is faith. About this the entire book does not mention a single word anywhere. It is occupied solely with praising monasticism and monkish works, which are altogether at variance with the customary ways of people." (LW 3:325, see Robert Kolb, For All the Saints, Changing Perceptions of Marytrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987], 14.)

⁹ The Golden Legend, Agatha, Jacobus Voragine (1275), tr. William Caxton (1483). (http://www.christianiconography.info/goldenLegend/agatha.html, accessed 1/19/19). These passages are excerpted, and I've added more modern punctuation to aid readability. The old English spelling is retained.

Agatha refused, saying:

"My courage and my thought be so firmly founded upon the firm stone of Jesu Christ, that for no pain it may not be changed; your words be but wind, your promises be but rain, and your menaces be as rivers that pass, and how well that all these things hurtle at the foundement of my courage, yet for that it shall not move."

The Golden Legend then mentioned Agatha's desire for martyrdom.

In this manner answered she, and alway wept in making her prayers, and much great desire had she to come to Jesu Christ by martyrdom and by torments.

Aphrodisia sent her back to Quintianus.

When Aphrodisia saw well that in no wise she would be moved, she went to the provost Quintianus, and said to him: "Sooner should the stones wax soft, and iron turn to soft lead, than turn the courage of this maid, or to take from her the Christian faith."

Calling her to himself, Quintianus began the trial. This was the real test of the martyrs. They were faced with the option of idolatry or torture and death.

When Quintianus heard this, anon he made her to come tofore him in judgment, and demanded her of her lineage, and at the last he would constrain her to make sacrifice unto the idols.

St. Agatha answered that they were no gods, but were devils that were in the idols made of marble and of wood, and overgilt.

Quintianus said, "Choose one of two; or do sacrifice to our gods, or thou shalt suffer pain and torments."

St. Agatha said, "I marvel much that so wise a man is become such a fool, that thou sayest of them to be thy gods, whose life thou ne thy wife will follow. If they be good I would that thy life were like unto theirs; and if thou refusest their life, then art thou of one accord with me. Say then that they be evil and so foul, and forsake their living, and be not of such life as thy gods were."

Quintianus said, "What goest thou thus vainly speaking? Make sacrifice unto the gods, or if thou do not I shall make thee to die by divers torments."

St. Agatha abode firm and stable in the faith. Then Quintianus did do put her in a dark prison, and she went also gladly, and with as good will as she had been prayed to go to a wedding.

This last line, "she went also gladly, and with as good will as she had been prayed to go to a wedding," is what stuck in the imagination of Martin Luther. We will see it. When Luther wrote of Agnes and Agatha, he mentioned their joyfulness on the way to torment, their dancing to death. First, though, Agatha had a crown to achieve.

The trial continued the following day.

And Take They Our Life

On the morning Quintianus made her to be brought tofore him in judgment, and said to her, "Agatha, how art thou advised for thy health?" She answered, "Christ is mine health."

Quintianus said, "Deny Christ thy God, by which thou mayest escape thy torments."

St. Agatha answered, "Nay, but deny thou thine idols which be of stones and of wood, and adore thy maker, that made heaven and earth, and if thou do not thou shalt be tormented in the perpetual fire in hell."

That did it. Quintianus had Agatha drawn and stretched. He ordered her breasts to be cut off. Agatha continued to confess her faith. She was put in prison, and here follows a long account of a miracle. St. Peter appeared to her in prison, offered to heal her, and, in the end did. Four days later she was brought before Quintianus and continued to confess Christ.

After four days Quintianus made her to be brought tofore him in judgment, and said to her that she should do sacrifice to the idols.

She answered, "These words be vain, and thy commandments evil, they make the air to stink, he is much mechant that believeth in a stone without entendment, and leaveth our Lord the very God that hath healed me, and hath restored to me again my paps."

Quintianus demanded her, "Who is he that hath healed thee?" She said, "Jesu Christ."

Quintianus said, "Namest thou yet Jesu Christ?"

She answered, "I shall have in my heart Jesu Christ as long as I shall live."

Quintianus said, "Yet shalt thou see if he may help and heal thee." And then he made her, all naked, to be rolled upon burning brands, and anon the ground where the holy virgin was rolled on, began to tremble like an earthquave, and a part of the wall fell down upon Silvain, counsellor of Quintianus, and upon Fastion his friend, by whose counsel she had been so tormented. And then all the city of Catania was abashed, and the people came running unto the house of Quintianus, saying, in a great bruit that the city was in a great peril for the torments that he did to St. Agatha.

Quintianus redoubled the bruit of the people, and went out behind and commanded that she should be remised in prison. When she came into the prison she joined her hands, holding them up to heavenward, and said in praying, "Lord God Jesu Christ which hast created me of nought, and sith my youth hast kept me and hast suffered me to live well in my youth, which hast taken from mine heart the love of the world and hast made me to overcome the torments, and hast lent me patience among the pains, I pray thee that thou take my spirit, for it is time that thou make me to depart from this world and to come to thy mercy."

This orison and prayer made she on high tofore many persons. And anon after she gave up the ghost, and rendered her soul, the year of our Lord two hundred and fifty-three in the time of Decius, the emperor of Rome.

Agatha of Sicily, age 22, martyred in 253, in the persecution of Decius. We'll meet her in the resurrection.

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In the 54 volumes of the American Edition of Luther's Works he mentioned Agatha about 31 times, and Agnes 41 times, often together. Luther understood their joyful confidence in the midst of suffering to be a work of the Holy Spirit, and the mark of a Christian.

I'd like to give Luther some room and let him preach to us from the Scriptures and the accounts of Agnes and Agatha. He brought these martyrs into his teaching as prime examples of how the Lord overcomes the world and the devil through the victory of faith.

In John 14:16-17, Jesus promises us the gift of the Holy Spirit: "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. You know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you."

Thus we read about the holy martyrs who defied tyrants, or about the suffering and tortures of the young virgins Agnes and Agatha, who were so cheerful and happy on their way to prison and death that they imagined with pride that they were going to their wedding. Indeed, dear daughter, if you can face imprisonment and beheading as though you were going to a dance, then your heart, mind, and courage must surely be different from the world's. You can disdain life and limb, nobility and friendship, and all the possessions on which the world places its reliance. Such courage must be the work of

none other than the Holy Spirit. (LW 24:118, On John 14:17, c. 1537)

First, what stuck out to Luther (and should to us as well) was their cheerfulness in the midst of such mistreatment and torture. They surpassed courage. They rejoiced in the midst of terror. They danced to death. This is the work of faith, giving the martyrs a "different heart, mind, and courage." The Holy Spirit, who both led Jesus to temptation and raised Him from the dead, made them to be new creations. They were not of this world and the things of this world, not bound to this life, but free to live and free to die. Eternal life took hold of them, and the grip of life so tight that the grip of death did not frighten them at all.

Agnes and Agatha treasured the Lord's Word above all things, resulting in a corresponding disdain for "life, limb, nobility, friendship, and possessions." Thus their dance to death was not a manufactured joy or a coerced contentment. Christ was truly set apart in their heart, their treasure was in heaven, and the summons to death's sleep was truly sweet.

Faith works a true change in the Christian heart.

Faith is a divine work in us that transforms us and begets us anew from God, kills the Old Adam, makes us entirely different people in heart, spirit, mind, and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. Oh, faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, so that it is impossible for it not to be constantly doing what is good.

Faith is a vital, deliberate trust in God's grace, so certain that it would die a thousand times for it. And such confidence and knowledge of divine grace makes us joyous, mettlesome, and merry toward God and all creatures. (LW 35:370, Preface to Romans, 1522, 1546, quoted in the Formula of Concord, IV:10,12)

"Joyous, mettlesome, and merry," would that this would be a description of us.

Thus the saintly martyrs and the saintly maidens Agatha, Lucia, and many others were bound to the vine. They regarded death as a game and sin and hell as nothing. They were completely certain of the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and the best intention of the Father. Even in the midst of death they were joyful and fearless. (LW 8:255, On Genesis 49:12, 1545)

Faith marries us to Christ, and divorces us from the world.¹⁰ This antagonism towards the world sets us free. The antagonism *of* the world increases this freedom. (Get ready, this is a good one)

¹⁰ Consider this glorious passage from *The Freedom of the Christian*, "The third incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph. 5:31–32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage—indeed the most perfect of all marriages, since human marriages are but poor examples of this one true marriage—it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as His own. Let us compare these and we shall see inestimable benefits. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is a bridegroom, He must take upon Himself the things which are His bride's and bestow upon her the things that are His. If He gives her His body and

Thus we also read that when St. Agatha, a girl fourteen or fifteen years old, was being led to imprisonment and torture, she went cheerfully and said that she felt as though she were being escorted to a dance. These are surely words of comfort and defiance from a young girl who regards the torment and death to which she is being led as no different from a wedding and an occasion for the greatest joy. This is due to faith, which has averted the eyes from the physical appearance and sensations and has directed them upward to the life beyond. It has concluded: "What can they accomplish, even if they do their worst and afflict me with every misfortune? They only usher me quickly from this misery to Christ in heaven." It is the sole purpose of all the sufferings of Christians to promote our Christian life and to bear fruit for a fuller knowledge and a stronger confession of the Word, a more certain hope, and a wider expansion of the kingdom of Christ. The world, to be sure, intends to do us harm, but it really accomplishes no more than what the church sings about the martyrs: "Unknowingly they lead us into eternal joys." Unknowingly and involuntarily the world leads the Christians through torture and death to eternal joys. Such tortures are nothing else, as St. Agatha said, than taking our arms in a friendly way and leading us to heaven as a bride is led to a dance. Whatever harm is done to Christians by the world, God turns back their anger and lets the harm redound to their advantage. (LW 24:196-197, On John 15:2 c. 1537)

very self, how shall He not give her all that is His? And if He takes the body of the bride, how shall He not take all that is hers?" (LW 31:351)

Suffering helps us lift our eyes "to the life beyond," to eternal life where true joys are found, where Jesus is preparing a place for us. Because death brings us into the kingdom of Christ, and because suffering brings us closer to death, the troubles of this life lead us to eternal joys! The devil cannot help but serve our Lord Jesus. He tempts us, troubles us, threatens us, tortures us, and takes us by the hand and leads us to our Bridegroom Christ! Glory! Lord, give us the eyes to see what Agnes and Agatha saw!

Just as the devil brought ruin on himself and his kingdom by driving Jesus to the cross, so now he continues to work his own destruction through the crosses and troubles he brings to the Christian.

Because the Christian is forgiven, filled with the Holy Spirit, and joyful, the devil's attacks confirm the mercy of God, and culminate in the great gift of death, our heavenly birth.

Consider this commentary from Luther on Psalm 54.

Thus the flesh is crucified, but the spirit is saved and set free. See how short this psalm is, and yet how long! Thus the apostle says (2 Cor. 12:9-10): "For strength is made perfect in weakness," and "when I am weak, then I am strong." Again, "I will gladly boast of my weaknesses that the strength of Christ may dwell in me." Ps. 68:9: "It was weakened, but Thou didst make it perfect." Thus we read, in 2 Cor. 13:3: "Christ is not weak but powerful in you." And this way of speaking is quite customary for the apostle. Did not also the holy martyrs demonstrate this in deed? Think of St. Agatha, St. Lucia, St. Agnes, and others, how the more people raged against them

openly, the more courageous they became inwardly. Here they were able to say, "In distress Thou hast enlarged me" (Ps. 4:1). (LW 10, On Psalm 54:4)

The Christian might be lowly in every way: small, weak, poor, and foolish. Yet the Word that dwells in us in indestructible. The strength and might of God are wrapped up in humility, the victory of faith hidden under the suffering of the martyrs. Faith sees this, rejoices, and grows more and more courageous.

This courage and joy in the face of death is so strange Luther considered it a kind of spiritual drunkenness, drunk with joy. There is a sanctified madness to the Christian's approach to suffering.

And in Rom. 5:3 St. Paul says: "We also rejoice in our sufferings." Later on many martyrs, men and women, went to their deaths with happy hearts and laughing mouths as though they were going to a happy festival or dance. So we read of St. Agnes and St. Agatha, who were virgins of thirteen or fourteen years, and of many others. They not only boldly and confidently conquered the devil and the world through their deaths, but were also cheerful with all their hearts, just as if they had been drunk with great joy. And it does vex the devil beyond measure when one can so confidently despise his great might and guile. In our times, too, many have died cheerfully because they have confessed Christ. (LW 12:177, On Psalm 23:5)

Remembering that the devil's great "might and guile" is the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14), we see that the joy of Agnes and Agatha

was not only conquering the devil and the world, but vexing the devil beyond measure. The devil hates it when we are not afraid.

Luther knew that this joyful dying is not easy. Everything in our flesh fights against it. He gave great pastoral insight on facing these fears, reminding that David and Paul also had that same struggle.

"Good!" you say, "but I do not yet find myself sufficiently well equipped to die cheerfully." That does not matter. As mentioned earlier, David did not always have the ability either; indeed, at times he complained that he had been cast away from the presence of God. Nor did other saints at all times have full confidence in God and an eternal pleasure and patience in their distresses and afflictions. St. Paul at times trusted so securely and surely in Christ that he would not have bothered even to stand up because of the Law, sin, death, and the devil. "It is no longer I who live," he says (Gal. 2:20), "but Christ who lives in me." And (Phil. 1:23): "My desire is to depart and to be with Christ." And (Rom. 8:32, 35): "Who shall separate us from the love of God? He did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all. Will He not also give us all things with Him? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or the sword separate us from Him?" When he speaks here of death, the devil, and all misfortune, he is as sure as though he were the strongest and greatest saint, for whom death would be pure joy. Elsewhere, then, he speaks as though he were the weakest and greatest sinner on earth. 1 Corinthians 2:3: "I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling." Romans 7:14: "I am carnal,

sold under sin," which brings me into captivity. Romans 7:24: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?" And in Galatians 5:17, he teaches that in the saints there is an eternal struggle of the flesh against the spirit. Therefore you ought not despair so soon, though you find yourself weak and fainthearted, but pray diligently that you might remain with the Word and grow in the faith and knowledge of Christ. (LW 12:178)

What if we are not ready to die like the martyrs? First, don't despair. Next, consider Paul and David, who had the same struggle,s, and know that the flesh and the spirit are battling in you. Finally, pray that you would remain in the Word and grow in faith and the knowledge of Christ. We know that readiness to die is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and that the Lord will give it at the right time, when it is needed. The martyrs are not examples of superhuman faith; they are examples of the power of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. Cheerfulness in the face of death is not accomplished by our own strength, but by the Word of God.

When we have Christ's Word in our heart, we scorn and defy the devil's wrath. Notice, first, how Luther extols the Word of Christ. Next, see how the Word which prevails is the Word of Jesus' victory over sin, death, and the devil on the cross. Finally, watch this Word frustrate the devil. (This is a long quotation, but, friend, you tell me which part I could cut out.)

Accordingly, having peace in Him means nothing else than this: he who has Christ's Word in his heart becomes so bold and unafraid that he can scorn and defy the devil's wrath and raging. This was demonstrated by the holy martyrs, yes, even by young maidens like Saints Agatha and Agnes, who faced their torment joyfully, as though they were going to a dance, and even mocked their angry tyrants. Do you not suppose that it vexed the tyrants to see a young girl so utterly despise their devilish anger, the sword, and death that she called it nothing else than going to a dance? My dear friend, where does she get such defiance? The precious Word of Christ gives it to her. When this Word enters the heart, it generates courage like that of these saintly maidens. It must annoy the devil beyond measure and inflict great agony on him to see his fierce anger—the anger of a dragon and a lion, the anger which devours the whole world—so utterly ridiculed and despised. Such courage can be brought about with one little word from Him who says: "I have told you this. Therefore you have heard from Me that you shall be of good cheer and unafraid, that I have overcome the world, and that you shall be a mighty lord and shall trample them underfoot, even though they put you to death."

In what way were the dear martyrs, and especially such young girls, different from us and other people? What was the difference? Where did they get the courage and the joy others do not have? Manifestly, from no other source than this Word in their hearts. "Therefore," Christ says here, "just bear in mind that I have told you this. Do not be overawed, but confidently overawe those who want to plague and torture you. For their plaguing,

torturing, and frightening shall become your joy and delight, your garden of roses."

And what is the reason for all this? How does Christ make them so defiant? How does He fill their hearts with such comfort? He does so when He says: "The battle is already won. I have overcome the world." "Indeed," you declare, "it is easy for Thee to say that Thou hast overcome, just as it is easy for others—Peter and Paul, for example—to say this. But where am I?" Christ answers: "I certainly am not telling you this for My own benefit. Do you not hear? This is meant for you. You are to know that it was not for Myself that I overcame the world, and you are to take comfort from this knowledge. For I did not have to descend from heaven for My own sake, since I was Lord over all creatures before I did so, and the devil and the world surely had to let Me alone. But I did this for your sakes, and it is for your sakes that I am saying this. My words are meant for your comfort, consolation, and peace. Therefore take them to heart, and consider that I, Jesus Christ, have won the victory."

Christ says that the victory has been won, that all peril and anxiety have vanished. It is no longer necessary for us to wrestle and fight. All this has already taken place. The world, the devil, and death have been defeated and lie prostrate. Heaven, righteousness, and life are victorious. All that remains for us to do is to spread this news throughout the world and to intone the ἐπινίκιον or song of victory and to sing joyfully "Christ is risen." He has accomplished all this and has given complete victory to those who hear and believe this. But we must preach, confess, and speak highly of this news before the entire world; we must rely on it and say to anyone who wants to attack us: "What do you propose to do, tyrant, world, and devil? Are you robbing me of my property,

my honor, my life? Then what? The victory has been won; yes, it has been won. For here is Christ, who lives and conquers. My dear sir, do not try to rob me of Him. Or if you can, try your power on Him once more, and see what happens."

A Christian must accustom himself to think about Christ's victory—the victory in which everything has already been accomplished and in which we have everything we should have. Henceforth we live only to spread among other people the news of what Christ has achieved. We must do so by exhorting them with words and with our example to give thought to the victory Christ has won for us and has given to us. For this Victor has accomplished everything. There is nothing for us to add to what He has done—neither the blotting out of sin nor victory over the devil and death. Everything has already been laid low. Henceforth our suffering and fighting are no real battle; they are only a prize or a part of the glory of this victory.

For our suffering, yes, the suffering and the blood of all the martyrs and saints, would not gain the victory for us. It is impossible for us to defeat and trample underfoot sin, death, and hell by what we do. The pope and his crowd lie when they say that we can do this; by making such a statement they insult and blaspheme Christ. Here my fighting comes too late. If I am to have comfort and peace, the battle must have been won beforehand, and the victory must be there. "I," says Christ, "have already accomplished this. But accept it, and make use of My victory by singing about it, glorying in it, and making a show of it. Just be of good cheer." (LW 24:420-422, On John 16:33, c. 1537)

Christ is risen! Christ has triumphed! The kingdom of darkness is overthrown. The battle is over, there is no fighting left for us to do. Our work is no work at all. We accept the victory of Jesus, sing about it, glory in it, make a show of it, and are of good cheer. We rejoice in the work that Christ has accomplished for us.

When Agnes and Agatha dance to death they are celebrating the resurrection. When they suffer with such good cheer, they confess the empty tomb.

Where there is the forgiveness of sins, there also is life and salvation. Where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is no fear of sin, death, and the devil. A bad conscience makes death fearful. A good conscience (that is, a forgiven conscience) makes death sweet.

And we who believe have this beginning, that even when we feel death, we nevertheless do not fear it as others, who are tormented by an evil conscience and grow pale even when the word "death" is mentioned, feel it. But the godly and saintly martyrs despise death and laugh at it. Thus when Agnes was being carried off to prison and torture, she said that she felt just as if she were being led to a dance. What, I ask, was the source of such great courage on the part of the maiden? She was not afraid. She did not tremble. No, she exulted as though she were being summoned to a most sumptuous feast. This was no Epicurean contempt of death; it was true wisdom and understanding, because of which she concluded that life was very close to her. Therefore she laughed at the devil and death and regarded them as a joke, because for her death had been

swallowed up through life. *This is the theology we teach.* (LW 8:191, On Genesis 48:21, emphasis added)

Luther knew that other philosophies attempt to set people free from the fear of death. Epicureanism, for example, teaches that there is no judgment after death, and therefore death is not to be feared. This is not a Christian fearlessness. Death is not the end, but the beginning. Death, for the Christian, is the doorway to life eternal. Where is death's victory? Christ is risen. Death is swallowed up by life. How can death devour us when it has already been chewed up and spit out by Jesus?

Faith brings the objective truth of the resurrection of Jesus into the Christian heart and conscience. It changes who we are, and, in turn, changes how we see the world. We are a new creation, and when we are made new, "all things are made new!" (2 Corinthians 2:17). God is our friend. Life is a gift. Death is a sleep. Persecutions and troubles are joy and dancing.

When the heart is cheerful, everything looks happy, even the cross and persecution. Thus St. Agnes, led to the sacrifice, was in her heart being escorted to the dance. Thus all the godly regard all things as happy in inner peace and happiness and rejoicing in the Spirit. Here you see that all Christians are joyful because peace is a fruit of the Spirit, and so is joy. (LW 17:258, On Isaiah 55:12)

To the pure, all things are pure. Even the devil is a servant of God to bring us to Christ and help us on the way to eternal life.

This is a very practical theology. It was practical for Luther. The pope and the emperor were raging against the Reformers. Many preachers of the Gospel were martyred. Luther expected martyrdom himself. What do you do in these circumstances? Or, perhaps a better question, what is the Lord accomplishing through these circumstances?

Thus by not turning away evils or enemies but by turning them loose, the Lord causes us to feel safe, to rejoice always, not to be overcome by any evil, even though the whole world may bare its fangs against us. Let the pope rage. Let the emperor and his princes threaten us with evil. We shall sit in the beauty of peace, even though they throw us into prison. If they are allowed to give themselves over to their wrath, if finally they even slay us, we will rejoice no less than if we had been invited to a wedding. This is the response St. Agnes gave to the tyrant who was about to kill her, etc. (LW 20:25, On Zechariah 2)

The Lord lets the evil loose on us so that we would feel safe and rejoice! This seems counterintuitive, but the Lord teaches us joy *in* tribulation. He teaches us the beauty of peace in prison. The Lord overcomes the strong through the weak, and He gives us that victory, even if we are slain.

Luther also recognized the target of persecution as Christ and His Word. We are attacked because we are in Christ and Christ is in us. This gives us even more confidence. Jesus cannot be overthrown. He holds the field forever.

Dear world, you are not persecuting me; you are persecuting Christ, my Lord. Since I am aware of this, I challenge you to do your worst. Here I stand in God's name and let you, together with all the devils from hell, fume in their name. You can persecute, exile, yes, even kill me, if my Lord Christ so wills; but you will not deprive me of my courage and my comfort, nor will you bring me to the point of being grieved in my heart. For since I am experiencing this for the sake of Christ, I shall cheerfully risk it in His name and only sing and exult joyfully in the face of the devil's raging. In this way the devil discovers that he is losing his power and that he cannot dig his sword and spear in as far as he would like. For he is not concerned about tormenting us bodily; but he is a spirit who incessantly thirsts for our tears and our heart's blood, to make us despair and languish with sadness. This would be his joy and delight. Yet he will not succeed in this; we will turn the tables on him and learn to mock both the devil and the world. Then we will laugh gleefully at them, not they at us. The skill with which they want to make us sad, angry, and impatient will fail them; and they will consume themselves, together with their hatred and wrath; and when they see us, they will suffer great agony. They will see that we remain cheerful through it all and scorn them when they attempt to vent their anger on us so vehemently.

This is what the holy martyrs, also young maidens such as Agnes and Agatha, did in times past. The more angrily their tyrannical judges raged, the more defiant the maidens were. (LW 24:277, emphasis added, On John 15:19, c. 1537)

This passage gives us that key to understanding Luther's theology of martyrdom. The devil attacks our bodies, but he really desires our "tears and heart blood," that is, our sadness and despair, our fear and worship. Yet these belong to Christ. We are the redeemed, the baptized, the children of God. We are forgiven and given eternal life, and therefore we are joyful and free.

As we rejoice in suffering and are cheerful in death, we "turn the tables" on the devil, we mock and sing and laugh gleefully at him. The joy of the Lord is our strength, and faith in God's promises the shield that stops all the devil's darts from reaching their target.

One of the ways the devil attacks the church is by laughing at her. We feel the scorn of the world. We know that our culture despises the church and her doctrine. Luther would have us "turn the tables," laugh at the devil, despise the world, defy the rage of persecutors with courage, comfort, and joy. Scowl fierce as they will, they can harm us none, neither will they steal our joy.

With this confidence, the enemies of Christ "will consume themselves." The devil wants us to fear, and is enraged by our fearlessness. He wants us to doubt, and our faith makes him angry. The devil wants us to be sad, our cheer drives him mad. He exalts himself above God. We see his foolish pride for what it really is, and laugh. Our laughter reminds him of his lowly place. The confidence of our faith is the devil's agony.

This understanding that the Lord uses the devil's own works to undo the devil kingdom was fundamental to Luther's preaching. The Lord works in a hidden way. It can't be any other way. The Christian is immortal. There is a trick the Lord plays on the devil;

He hides His strength in weakness. He covers life with death. He enlists the devil into His service for these tricks. The Christian is in on the game. We know that our momentary suffering is working in us the weight of eternal glory. We know that suffering produces hope. We know that Jesus is preparing a place for us, so that even though we have trouble in this world, we have good cheer in the confidence that Jesus has overcome the world, and that He is crushing the devil under our feet (Romans 16:20).

St. Agnes made it into Luther's last sermon, preached on February 15, 1546 in Eisleben. He would die in the Lord's name three days later. He preached about the rest and light yoke Jesus gives. Jesus gives us the strength to endure suffering. Jesus gives us the confidence to die with joy. Jesus gives us His Spirit who carries the heavy burdens for us. The hot coals we walk on will be like a bed of roses. When we suffer for Christ's sake, He is pleased with us, and we are confident in Him.

Christ says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden" [Matt. 11:28], and it is as though He were saying: Just stick to me, hold on to my Word and let everything else go. If you are burned and beheaded for it, then have patience, I will make it so sweet for you that you easily would be able to bear it. It has also been written of St. Agnes that when she was led to prison to be killed, it was to her as if she were going to a dance. Where did she get this? Ah, only from this Christ, from believing this saying, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." That is to say: If things go badly, I will give you the courage even to laugh about it;

and if even though you walk on fiery coals, the torment shall nevertheless not be so severe and the devil shall nevertheless not be so bad, and you will rather feel that you are walking on roses. I will give you the heart to laugh even though Turk, pope, emperor, and everybody else be filled with horrible wrath and rage. Only come to me; and if you are facing oppression, death, or torture, because the pope, the Turk, and emperor are attacking you, do not be afraid; it will not be heavy for you, but light and easy to bear, for I give you the Spirit, so that the burden, which for the world would be unbearable, becomes for you a light burden. For when you suffer for my sake, it is my yoke and my burden, which I lay upon you in grace, that you may know that this your suffering is well pleasing to God and to me and that I myself am helping you to carry it and giving you power and strength to do so. (LW 51:391-392)

They Loved Not Their Lives Unto Death: Martyrs for Pastors

pope Lutheran Church in Aurora, CO, doesn't have air conditioning. (This should not dissuade you from visiting when you're in town). One particularly hot summer Sunday morning the people looked wilted. They had melted, and their faces, as I made the announcements after the service, were full of expectant suffering. So I told the story of Romanus¹¹.

"Romanus went to Antioch to encourage the Christians who were suffering there. He was arrested and beaten. He preached to the proconsul, who was so enraged that he had Romanus' skin scraped off with the side of a sword. He still preached, so the soldiers struck his face, knocked out his teeth, tore out his beard, and scratched his eyelids. Still he preached and confessed Christ.

¹¹ More about Romanus here: https://wolfmueller.co/martyrmondayromanus/

The proconsul ordered his cheeks to be cut open. They were, and Romans said, 'I thank you, sir, for giving me more mouths to praise my God!' They tried to set him on fire, but the fire wouldn't start, so they threw him in prison where he died a few days later. If our brother Romanus can endure all that," I concluded, "we can make it through a hot service."

Nobody complained about the heat.

I'm pretty sure that is a *bad* use of the martyrs, but I do think it sets us off in the right direction. The martyrs give us courage.

Hebrews 12 reminds us that we are surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses. They are cheering us on as we labor to finish our race. They are singing the distant triumph song whose conquering strains strengthen our hearts and bodies. The martyrs remind us that we have not yet suffered to the point of shedding blood.

The martyrs remind us that we are not alone in the struggle, that we do not suffer by ourselves, that we are not the first to walk this narrow path.

Thereupon we should encourage and arouse ourselves by such examples to bear any difficulties, dangers, and griefs. But if we are killed, it is certain that by this means we are truly liberated and rescued from all evils, just as no evil at all befell the martyrs in former times, but they obtained the end of all their troubles. But if we are preserved, we should persevere and wait in hope and faith; for God does not hate us or turn us away in hostile fashion, no matter how He may conduct Himself toward us otherwise. Let us rather conclude: "I know that I have been baptized, that I have eaten the body and drunk

the blood of the Son of God, that I have been absolved by divine authority, that all my sins have certainly been forgiven me, and that victory over the devil, death, and hell has been promised me. What more should I ask for?" (LW 7:131-132, On Genesis 41:1-7, c. 1545)

Our Lutheran theology is rightly cautious about the cult of the saints, the superstitious and idolatrous practice of elevating the saints to an office and glory they do not have. The martyrs did not save themselves, and they cannot save us. They were sinners rescued by Jesus, like us. We do not look to them for help or intercession. We look with them to our Lord Jesus for help and intercession.

We want to approach our consideration of the saints and martyrs with caution, careful to avoid giving to them the glory due to Jesus. But we are also cautious to not forget them, to remember that the Lord gave the martyrs as a gift to the church.

The Lutheran Confessions outline a three-fold honor due to the saints.

Our Confession approves giving honor to the saints. This honor is threefold. The first is thanksgiving: we should thank God for showing examples of His mercy, revealing His will to save men, and giving teachers and other gifts to the church. Since these are His greatest gifts, we should extol them very highly; we should also praise the saints themselves for using these gifts, just as Christ praises faithful businessmen (Matt. 25:21, 23). The second honor is the strengthening of our faith: when we see

Peter forgiven after his denial, we are encouraged to believe that grace does indeed abound more than sin (Rom. 5:20). The third honor is the imitation, first of their faith and then of their other virtues, which each should imitate in accordance with his calling. (Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXI:4-6)

First, then, we thank God for giving the gift of martyrs to the church and preserving their history for us. Second, we are encouraged when we hear of the martyrs suffering such great things for the name of Christ. Third, we follow after the martyrs, both in their believing and in their living and dying. They are our heroes.

Christians need heroes.

It has been said, "You can learn everything you need to know about a person when you know who their hero is." Our heroes stand before our minds and imaginations as pictures of lives well-lived. Knowingly or unknowingly we act, talk, and think like our heroes, or at least we try. Part of our Christian life is being aware of our heroes, and part of pastoral care is cultivating the right heroes for the congregation. This is especially important in our modern context.

We live in an anti-heroic age. There is a systematic dismantling of any hero. Our culture is hell-bent on tearing down any person of greatness from the pedestal. We prefer to look down on rather than look up to. (Consider, as an example, the refrain concerning the American founders that they were all slaveholders. Progressivism attacks history. The future must be exalted, and the past, therefore, must be brought low.) This is dangerous. We all need heroes; we

all need champions. The martyrs and confessors are the Christian heroes. They are the race-finishers. They have that for which we still endeavor.

Their stories help us make sense of our own troubles. The histories of the martyrs teach us wisdom to face our own suffering. The courage and joy of the martyrs remind us that there is a better way to die.

But the martyrs can also be intimidating. When we hear of Agnes and Agatha dancing to the fire we think, "I could never do that. I'm afraid. My faith is weak." The martyrs were not superheroes. They, also, were afraid. They, also, were weak. It was the Holy Spirit who gave them the strength they needed when they needed it, and not before. And the same Holy Spirit is at work in us.

We should not be afraid of the hour of death. The martyrs are not examples of great people with great strength. The martyrs are examples of God's great provision in our time of need.

Here is how Jesus comforts us:

"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who

speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Matthew 10:16-20)

"Do not be anxious." The Holy Spirit provides the faith and the wisdom for such an hour.

The martyrs help put things in perspective.

I often hear people say, "It helps me to remember that someone is always worse off than me." I suppose that is true. The martyrs were bad off. We might be ridiculed for our faith, but at least our heads are still attached. But I think there is something more. The suffering of the martyrs is not put before us to engender sympathy. They certainly wouldn't think so. They are blessed, they consider themselves blessed in both their suffering and death.

The martyrs glory in their tribulation (Romans 5:3). They have counted it all joy to have fallen into various trials (James 1:2). "All joy"! The martyrs follow the footsteps of the apostles, who left their beating by the Sanhedrin "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41).

Peter says, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But *rejoice* insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also *rejoice* and be glad when His glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him *not* be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name" (1 Peter 4:12-16) [emphasis added].

The martyrs are boasting in their death. They are glorying in their weakness. They are praising God with their blood. They leaned into their suffering because they knew that the mercy of Christ would catch them.

It's true, sometimes the martyrs seem a little too excited to die. We wonder at Perpetua guiding the sword to her own neck. The cross will come, we don't need to go looking for it. But the martyrs were right that the best is yet to come, that death is the last enemy to be conquered, and that the gloomy portal leads to bliss untold.

The martyrs knew that to suffer in the name of Christ was good. They knew that to die in the name of Jesus was good, and blessed. May we also remember this.

Paul wrote to the Philippians, "For me, to live is Christ, to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). This is true for all the baptized. Our death is gain.

This is the right perspective, taught to us by the martyrs.. They remind us that we are free to suffer, free to die, free from the fear of death.

In an astonishing passage in Hebrews 2 we hear, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (Hebrews 2:14-15).

If we begin at the end of that verse, we notice that the fear of death makes us slaves to the devil. This should be noted well and preached often. When we are afraid of death we are bound, slaves of the devil.

The obvious example of how this works it put before us in the persecution of the church. The Christians were brought before the proconsul and given the option: idolatry or death. Offer this little pinch of incense or we will set you on fire. Say, "Caesar is lord," or we will throw you to the lions. Idolatry or death, and the fear of death would push the Christians into idolatry. Not the martyrs. The fear of death had been crucified with Christ.

In His death (back to Hebrews 2) Jesus destroyed the one who wielded the power of death. The strength of death is the law and sin, but the death of Jesus forgives sins, and in this forgiveness, death loses its strength, the devil loses his power. Where the forgiveness of sin is found, there also is life and salvation.

Freedom from the fear of death is freedom from the devil's tyranny. And more! Freedom from the fear of death is a triumph over the devil.

Revelation 12 shows us the vision of the saints and martyrs triumphing over the devil. "And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Revelation 12:11). "In this manner the saintly martyrs overcame death and all dangers; for they were sure that God was kind to them" (LW 3:264, On Genesis 19:10-11, c. 1539).

In this world we will have tribulation. It is appointed for each one of us to die. How do we suffer and die well? How do pastors teach their people to suffer and die?

The martyrs remind us to keep our eyes on the prize. Jesus waits on the other side of death. Our race ends in His arms. This light and momentary affliction will soon give way to an eternal splendor.

The martyrs are part of that great cloud of witnesses, cheering us on, "Keep the faith!" "You can make it!" It might soon be time for us to suffer and die; Christ has suffered and died for us, and our martyr's confidence is in Him. Christ is our Savior. He is risen, and He will welcome us into His kingdom.

It is high time that we earnestly pray God that He hallow His name. But it will cost blood, and those who enjoy the inheritance of the holy martyrs, the inheritance which was won with the blood of the martyrs, must in their turn take on the role of martyr. (LW 44:54, Treatise on Good Works, 1520)

Appendix: A Collection of Helpful Luther Quotations on the Martyrs

The Blood of the Martyrs is a Prayer for God's Vengeance

And so until now this sin reposes at the door, but in due time it will manifest itself. The blood of the very excellent and steadfast martyr Leonhard Kayser, which was shed in Bavaria, does not remain silent. The blood of Henry von Zutphen, which was shed in Ditmarsen, does not remain silent. The blood of our Anthony of England, who was cruelly put to death by his own Englishmen without a hearing, does not keep silent. I am saying nothing about a thousand others who, although their names were less renowned, nevertheless were comrades of these men both in the confession of their faith and in their martyrdom. The blood of all these will not keep silence. In due time it will compel God to come down

from heaven and execute on the earth a judgment that will be unbearable for the enemies of the Gospel.

Thus we must not assume that God is disregarding our blood. We must not assume that God has no regard for our afflictions. "Our tears, too, He gathers into His bottle," as Ps. 56:8 says. And the cry of the blood of the godly penetrates the clouds and heaven until it arrives at God's throne and urges Him to avenge the blood of the righteous (Ps. 79:10). (LW 1:288, On Genesis 4:10)

Noah, Martyr Above all Martyrs

Moreover, just as we stated above that Noah is a virgin above all virgins, so here we also observe that he was a martyr above all martyrs. The situation of our so-called martyrs is most fortunate; for, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, they overcome death in one hour and surmount all perils and temptations. Noah, however, lived among the ungodly a full six hundred years, amid many serious temptations and dangers, just as Lot did in Sodom.

Perhaps this was also why Lamech, Noah's father, gave him this name at his birth. When the saintly father observed how prevalent wickedness was becoming in the world, he conceived the hope that his son would comfort the godly, namely, that he would combat sin and Satan, its author, and would restore the lost righteousness. But the wickedness then in its beginning not only did not subside at Noah's time but raged even more. Therefore Noah is a martyr above all martyrs. How much easier it is to surmount all perils in

one hour than to observe the great wickedness of the world for so many centuries! (LW 2:7-8, On Genesis 6:2)

On this Theme of Long Endurance Being More Difficult than Martyrdom...

From this it appears what great patience and faithfulness there was in the patriarchs. The martyrs also suffered very many atrocious things, but there is no comparison with the hard toils of the patriarchs and the dangers they encountered. For it was great patience to endure such tyranny for 20 years. But how this change of wages came about has been stated above. (LW 6:70, On Genesis 31:41)

Torture is Child's Play

In this one way St. Stephen, St. Lawrence, Sebastian, Fabian, and men like them overcame death and all tortures. Because they kept the faith of Abraham and comforted themselves with these visible signs of grace, all tortures—as an often repeated statement of Vincent puts it—were amusement, pastime, and, so to speak, child's play for them. (LW 3:125, On Genesis 17:8)

The Martyrs are Comforted in Their Afflictions

And in this manner the saintly martyrs overcame death and all dangers; for they were sure that God was kind to them. But they concluded that their tortures and afflictions were due to magic and the devil, and were permitted by God for the purpose of testing their faith. Therefore they even rejoiced in their adversities and scoffed at Satan. We should do the same thing; but we are very frequently overcome by weakness, as the examples even of great saints prove. For Paul, too, is filled with fears and regains his courage when he sees the brethren (Acts 28:15). Such fear is not felt by the ungodly, for they are sure of God's favor. Accordingly, even though some adversity befalls them, they smugly attribute this to Satan. (LW 3:264-265, On Genesis 19:10-11)

Not the Visions of Angels, but the Word Alone Gives us the Strength to Face Death

Without an appearance of angels, and strengthened by the Word alone, the martyrs met death for the sake of the name of Christ. Why should we, too, not be satisfied with the same thing? Baptism is a sufficiently manifest and clear appearance. So are the Eucharist, the Keys, the ministry of the Word. They are equal to—yes, they even surpass—all the appearances of all angels, in comparison with which Abraham had only droplets and crumbs. (LW 4:126, On Genesis 22:11)

The Joy of the Martyrs Facing Death Does not Mean that we do not Mourn and Groan at Human Affliction

When I hear that the Turks are venting their rage on Christian blood in a most cruel manner, that they are impaling little children on stakes, that they are abusing women for purposes of unmentionable disgrace, it certainly becomes me to groan, and the human heart cannot help being deeply moved at such monstrous behavior. But some Stoic will object: "You are a delicate martyr! You weep and lament like a woman. It becomes men to despise such things! Of what concern is it to us that virgins and women are dragged off to be defiled and slaughtered?" This is raving madness, not fortitude! For what can be mentioned or thought of that is more foreign to all humanity than not to be affected by the disasters that fall on others, and such atrocious ones too? It is not godly or Christian to laugh in the midst of the dangers of others, when, for example, we see people being led into error or the emperor and the Turk attacking in rather cruel fashion and the pope plunging so many thousands of souls into eternal ruin. In this case it becomes me to be a man and to think that nothing human is foreign to me, as the man says in the comedy. But the Christian should be moved much more by common evils and the destruction of so many bodies and souls. Christ Himself enjoins φιλοστοργίαν ("tender affection") when He says (Luke 6:36): "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful," and Paul in Rom. 12:13 says: "Contribute to the needs of the saints." (LW 6:253-254, On Genesis 35:8)

On the Two-Fold Temptation, First of Trouble, Then of Pleasure

Here two contrary spirits clashed in supreme efforts. The devil attacks Joseph very gently and flatteringly, but it is horrible savagery. For when he sees that the godly cannot be overcome by any kind of torments, he finally attacks and overpowers them with lust and pleasures, as Jerome says somewhere. And Cyprian writes that the heathen were accustomed to torture the martyrs with slow torments and did not let them die, even though the martyrs earnestly desired to be done away with. Later, when the martyrs could not be overcome by torments, says Cyprian, the heathen brought in the most beautiful harlots, who were to stir up the itching of the flesh with kisses and blandishments. For they knew that the Christians commended chastity and asserted that God hated promiscuous sex. Accordingly, they wanted the unimpaired conscience of the Christians to be polluted and their doctrine to be disgraced in this way. (LW 7:80, On Genesis 39:7-10)

Encouragement in this Life of Trouble

Thereupon we should encourage and arouse ourselves by such examples to bear any difficulties, dangers, and griefs. But if we are killed, it is certain that by this means we are truly liberated and rescued from all evils, just as no evil at all befell the martyrs in former times, but they obtained the end of all their troubles. But if we are preserved, we should persevere and wait in hope and

faith; for God does not hate us or turn us away in hostile fashion, no matter how He may conduct Himself toward us otherwise. Let us rather conclude: "I know that I have been baptized, that I have eaten the body and drunk the blood of the Son of God, that I have been absolved by divine authority, that all my sins have certainly been forgiven me, and that victory over the devil, death, and hell has been promised me. What more should I ask for?" (LW 7:131-132, On Genesis 41:1-7)

The Joy of the Martyrs from Being Filled with the Spirit

In this way the godly are filled with the Holy Spirit, so that they cannot keep from breaking forth into thanksgiving, confession, glorifying God, and teaching and proclaiming the Word of the Gospel.

The apostles and the martyrs were like this when they were drunk with the Holy Spirit. For a vine of this kind is very choice, and concerning it Wisdom says in Prov. 9:5: "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Then you will drink and become drunk, but with spiritual drunkenness."

Thus I understand this passage to mean that in Christ and in the time of Christ we must become drunk on the abundance of His house (cf. Ps. 36:8); that is, we are to receive the Holy Spirit from the Word and hearing. This causes us to become other men, just as an inebriated man conducts himself far differently from one who is fasting and famished. For the former laughs, rejoices,

exults, sings, and shouts for joy; the latter snarls and is sad and full of complaints. (LW 8:249, On Genesis 49:12)

The Joy of the Martyrs and Fighting the Flesh

Thus the saintly martyrs and the saintly maidens Agatha, Lucia, and many others were bound to the vine. They regarded death as a game and sin and hell as nothing. They were completely certain of the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and the best intention of the Father. Even in the midst of death they were joyful and fearless.

Thus they say concerning the exceptionally distinguished martyr Vincentius that when, after first being struck with clubs and later tortured with the rack, he was compelled to go on bare feet through live coals, he said that he was walking on roses. In this way he made fun of the savage tortures and laughed at the burning coals and the glowing iron as though it were a game and a joke. All this shows how great the riches of the promise of Shiloh are.

If we believe, then if death must be faced, or if plague, hunger, war, and all the fury of the devil and hell assail, we, too, should say: "I could defecate on you, devil, etc." This is certainly how the church believes, and it still displays the same stoutheartedness. For this is what it means to be drunk with the wine of the Holy Spirit and to speak of the great works of God in new tongues. And this is also what the prophets looked at, as we read in Amos 9:13: "The mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it." The kingdom of Christ is a precious rule. He who believes that he has a gracious God as his Father, and that Christ, the Son of God,

has abolished death, sin, hell, and the devil, should he not rejoice and exult? Indeed, he should even go through iron mountains and adversities of every kind with a fearless and invincible heart, and he should conclude that everything is flowing with honey, milk, and wine; yes, he should praise God with the height of joy and gratitude, now no longer as one who is mortal but as one who is living an eternal life.

This is surely how we all should feel. For these are the promises in Christ, as Paul says. They do not give a pouch full of gold and silver. No, they give a heart full of joy, of peace, and of a guarantee concerning eternal life. All this we see in the apostles Peter and Paul as well as in the martyrs Vincentius and others who are not disturbed, even though Annas and Caiaphas are angry, and who despise the threats of these men just as the angels in heaven despise them.

And today we laugh at that thunderbolt of papal excommunication, for we believe in Shiloh and are numbered among those who hear Him and believe in Him. Therefore I am certain that nothing can harm me, but that everything is compelled to serve me for salvation.

But the fact that we still tremble, are terrified, and fear, this is a mark of the weakness remaining in us and not of faith; it is a remnant of the Old Adam, who feels sin and fears the wrath of God, especially in us, who, when we were under the papacy, strengthened the blemish of nature by habit and teaching, since we had been taught to tremble at, to doubt, and to flee from the sight of Christ. And even now it is difficult for me to strip off and cast aside the doctrine of the pope, not only according to the old

man but also on account of the weakness of my faith. Because of this weakness I am still afraid to look at Christ. And certainly we have barely begun to hope and to call upon Christ as our Savior that He may come through death, famine, and war and set us free. Under the papacy we surely did not dare ask for this. Yet because of the pestilential and accursed doctrine of the pope I still think of and long for this liberation through the coming of Christ in great weakness.

Therefore we must fight against this original evil in a threefold manner. In the first place, it is necessary to learn the doctrine, which the pope has completely obscured and from which he has removed the promises, so that we did not know what Christ was but were simply heathen, Turks, and Jews. But now, after we have begun to be the first fruits of God's creatures, as James 1:18 says, we must gradually lay aside the papal leaven which clings to us until it is purged away completely, and we become accustomed to the richness of the promises and to faith. In the third place, the murmuring of the flesh must be checked. (LW 8:255, On Genesis 49:12)

The Lord Defeats the Devil through the Martyrs

The foot of Christ is the saints, like the apostles and martyrs, through whom He crushed the world. ["You will walk on the asp and the basilisk; and you shall trample the lion and the dragon under foot" (Ps. 91:13)]. But that trampling could only be accomplished through the sufferings and blood of martyrs. Then the world was

perfectly despised, when even unto death they did not give in to it and thus through blood were superior to it, as long as it could not achieve what it wanted. (LW 10:340, On Psalm 68:23)

The Two Offices in the Church, Feet and Tongue (Martyrs and Teachers)

For just as the order of martyrs is truly the foot and basis of the whole church, so the order of teachers is the tongue of the church. For the latter publicly proclaim that which the martyrs affirmed with their blood. And these two orders soon followed each other in the church. (LW 10:341, On Psalm 68:23)

Luther on the Three Waves of Persecution (His Summary Understanding of Christian History)

The waters were the sufferings which the Jews inflicted on Christ. The waters were the persecutors of the martyrs, let loose against the church by demons. The waters were and are the heretics let loose against the same church by the same demons. The waters are the vast number of lukewarm and nominal Christians let loose on the church to the present day by the same demons. (LW 10:351-352, On Psalm 69, Introduction)

Another on the Same Theme

The first persecution was of the martyrs, the second of the teachers, and the third in a general way of all estates. And the first took place through force, the second through wisdom, the third through the goodness of the world. The first was against force, the second against wisdom, and the third against the goodness and holiness of God. The first charged the church with weakness, the second with ignorance, and the third with corruption and blasphemy. (LW 11:308, On Psalm 102:7)

The Beautiful Time of the Martyrs

In the first place, as grass comes up without human endeavor, so also the children of the church. Second, as the grass comes up suddenly all over the earth, so the faithful spring up throughout the world, for "His Word runs swiftly" (Ps. 147:15). As the grass in spring is a most delightful sight in the meadows, so it was with the early church in the martyrs. That was the most delightful time of the church, when there were so many flowers and fragrant grass everywhere. Thus "the vines in flower yield their sweet smell" (Song of Sol. 2:13). (LW 10:414, On Psalm 72:16)

The Three-Fold Pattern of Suffering in the Martyrs

Behold (1) how he consoles himself in his sufferings with spiritual words (that is, with words that speak of spiritual things); (2) and has pity on the misery of his persecutors, on their error and lying; (3) and from both he rises up to the praise of God and becomes more and more courageous toward sufferings. And this is the true meaning of this psalm, which you could read in any martyr suffering agony with confidence, like St. Lawrence, etc. The martyrs do these three things in their sufferings, as is clear. (LW 11:405, On Psalm 116:15)

The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of the Church

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." These are her weapons and guns, with which she has defeated and conquered all her foes until now. With these she will also retain the victory until Judgment Day. The more the devil and the world plague and torture her, the better she fares. For her betterment and growth come in persecution, suffering, and dying. Therefore one of the old fathers has said: "The blood of the martyrs is a seed." Where one is executed, a hundred others rise again. Of this wonderful victory several psalms sing; for example, the ninth, the tenth, and others. (LW 12:174, On Psalm 23:5)

All Christians Should Prepare to Be Martyrs

So the Lord says to Jeremiah (Jer. 1:18): "I shall make your face iron so that you do not care who attacks it." And really, the office of teaching in the church requires such a mind that despises all dangers. In general, all the devout should prepare themselves so that they are not afraid of becoming martyrs, that is, confessors or witnesses of God. Christ does not want to hide in the world, but He wants to be preached, "not between four walls but from the roof" (Matt. 10:27), so that the Gospel shines in the world like a torch on a high mountain or on a watchtower. (LW 12:383-384, On Psalm 51:12)

"The Devil's Martyrs," Those Afflicted by False Doctrine

Elsewhere Scripture employs these words for fictitious worship or idolatry. It does it for the reason that every superstition truly tortures man. And so we speak in German of "martyrs of the devil." They are the people who load upon themselves unnecessary troubles. (LW 13:123, On Psalm 90:10)

The Ascension: The Martyr's Confidence and Comfort

Similarly we read that when the holy martyr St. Stephen was about to be stoned, he had this verse in his heart; in fact, it was visibly revealed to him, for he says (Acts 7:56): "Behold, I see the heavens

opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." This is what I would call a real vision: death is before his very eyes, yet he sees nothing but life in Christ. By this he defies all the rage and frenzy of his enemies, the fear and terror of death. He meets death with such a joy as though he were now really entering life.

All Christendom, from the beginning until this day, has based its comfort and defiance on this verse. This is what protected and preserved it. No human or physical power or might has protected and maintained Christendom until this day. On the contrary, in the greatest weakness and frailty, against all the devils and the wrath and rage of all the world, it was protected and maintained only through faith and by defiance in the name of this Lord, to whom was said this שֵבִי "בִּימִיל בִּש". "Sit at My right hand." For He has built so high and protected Himself so well that He can remain seated before everybody and still have enough might and power to defy their frenzy and wrath. Therefore, as Christians let us also take hold of such a faith and get the habit of putting our glory and defiance, our joy and comfort, in Him whenever we are under attack. (LW 13:245-246, On Psalm 110:1)

Every Christian is a Martyr, Fighting Against Death

Meeting death eye to eye is not a pleasant draught for the flesh. Death always appears in the company of sin and the Law. One readily understands that the saints are really martyrs, for they must live under the threat of death and wrestle and fight with death. If it does not involve tyrants and the ungodly, with fire, sword,

prison, and similar persecutions, it involves the devil himself. He can tolerate neither the Word of God nor those who keep and teach it. He besets them in life and in death. While the faithful are alive, he uses great attacks on their faith, hope, and love toward God. He beleaguers and storms a heart with fear, doubt, and despair until it shies away from God, hates and blasphemes Him, and the wretched conscience believes that God, the devil, death, sin, hell, and all creatures are one and have united as its eternal and relentless enemy. Neither the Turk nor the emperor can ever storm a city with such power as the devil uses in attacking a conscience. (LW 14:83-84, On Psalm 118:18)

The Martyrs Treasured God's Word Above all Things

Believe while you have the light, and make use of it in an accepted time. The exhortation is that we diligently learn and study the Word and grow in its understanding, so that we may be filled with the light of this glory. Those who regard this light as a treasure hold all glory of the flesh to be nothing. This is what we see in the martyrs. By comparison with the Word they spurned all things. (LW 17:312, On Isaiah 60:1)

God's Strength Begins where Man's Ends

He lets the godly become powerless and to be brought low, until everyone supposes their end is near, whereas in these very things He is present to them with all His power, yet so hidden and in secret that even those who suffer the oppression do not feel it but only believe. There is the fullness of God's power and His outstretched arm. For where man's strength ends, God's strength begins, provided faith is present and waits on Him. And when the oppression comes to an end, it becomes manifest what great strength was hidden underneath the weakness. Even so, Christ was powerless on the cross; and yet there He performed His mightiest work and conquered sin, death, world, hell, devil, and all evil. Thus all the martyrs were strong and overcame. Thus, too, all who suffer and are oppressed overcome. Therefore it is said in Joel 3:10: "Let the weak say, 'I am strong'"—yet in faith, and without feeling it until it is accomplished. (LW 21:340, On the Magnificat)

On the Praiseworthy Pride of the Martyrs

For instance, I may be possessed of a good and divine pride, commanded by God and demanded of me and all others. This says: "I must not give way to the devil; I will not look at the devil and follow him." Such an attitude stems from spiritual pride. It was demonstrated by the dear martyrs, who told the tyrants: "I shall not look at you and thus deny my God and Lord." This is really praiseworthy pride! And if I were to say in a tone of humility, instead of pride: "Dear pope, dear bishops, I shall gladly do what you require," my humility would be demonic and accursed, if at the same time I claim to be governed by the Word of God. Such

humility would be worthless, for you would be showing humility in a situation that calls for pride. (LW 22:232-233, On John 2:17)

Faith Cannot Hold its Tongue

If I earnestly believe that Christ is true God and that He became our Savior, I will never deny this but will proclaim it publicly against the Turks, the world, the pope, the Jews, and all the sects; and I will confess that it is true. I would rather forfeit my life or jeopardize property and honor than disavow this. Wherever faith is genuine, it cannot hold its tongue; it would rather suffer death. Such faith will also confess God's Word before tyrants. To be sure, it will encounter all sorts of trials and temptations from the devil, as the martyrs amply experienced. (LW 22:393, On John 3:19)

The Gospel is the Consolation of the Martyrs

This is preached that you may believe that Christ the Lord became man because of sin, as the articles of the Christian Creed declare. There I am assured that I shall have eternal life, that the devil will not devour me, that death will not consume me, and also that the poverty which oppresses will work no harm. What a consoling message this would be for the captive Christians in Turkey! They could believe it no matter how furiously the Turk may rant and rave. This was also a source of consolation for the martyrs. When the sword was put to their necks or the faggots were ignited, they

declared: "In spite of all I shall acclaim Him as my Lord." Often it would seem as though Christ cannot deliver us from sin, death, and tyrants, despite the assurance and conviction that we are loved by the Father and the Son. (LW 22:499, On John 3:35)

Luther was Ready for Martyrdom

If I follow in the footsteps of the holy bishops and martyrs, I am content; for they followed the dear apostles. (LW 22:513, On John 4)

Something More than Thoughts Gave the Martyrs Their Confidence

Now there are those who hold with us and declare that Christ abides in them. But when trials confront them and they are faced with loss of life, honor, or goods, and particularly with death, when it is a question of sacrificing their life, then Christ is not found dwelling in them. Then mere thoughts are inadequate, for these are nothing but your work, power, natural reason, and a feeble creature. But if the terrors of a bad conscience are to be subdued, if the devil is to be frightened away and repelled, if death is to be overcome, then a divine force and not a mere thought is required. Something else must reside in you, so that your enemies will have to cope with a power which will prove too strong for them, a power which they fear, from which they flee, and which will permit you to carry off the victory.

Satan is an angry adversary. He does not worry much about thoughts. Something must be found in you which will prove too strong for him. This was apparent in the martyrs. How bold they were, what spirit and courage they displayed when they confronted the judges, fully aware that life and limb, honor and goods were at stake! Such conduct calls for consolation, not for a mere thought. It must be a matter of the heart that a person can face death and every trial cheerfully and say: "Honor, goods, life and limb, and all that is earthly, begone! I am determined to remain here, right here!" Then it will become manifest whether or not a person is a Christian and remains constant by means of his thoughts. (LW 23:145, On John 6:56)

Death is Destroyed in the Martyrs

Christ continues: "Then you will experience how My power, yes, also the Father's power, will work in you and manifest itself. The sense of life and victory over death will be strong in you and will take over your heart in such a way that no terror will drive you from Me, no death will murder you. On the contrary, you will remain confident of victory, assured that death will be totally subdued and destroyed both in Me and in you, and that in its place pure life will prevail. Then you will be called true Christians; you will remain in Me and I in you. Then neither the devil nor death nor any adversity can have any power over you; then you will be able defiantly to snap your fingers at them." We read that the holy martyrs treated the tyrants and their cruel raging and raving with scorn despite all

kinds of pain and torture. Even the young virgins mocked them and rejoiced in torment and suffering, as though they were about to go to a dance.

Christians should be aware of and know this. As has been said, they must learn to ignore death, to despise it through Christ, and to fix their thoughts on life alone. No sage, scholar, or saint can acquire this knowledge without Christ. In short, the world will never have and experience it. Indeed, it will not hear and heed this; for it regards it as the greatest folly and heresy. Therefore this is and ever will remain the knowledge of the Christians; it is surely the chief Christian doctrine and understanding to be certain and, as Christ states here, to know that the Man Christ is really and truly in God, and God in Him—that He Himself is the true and living God. And then one must know that the same One who is in God is also in us, and we in Him. He who has this knowledge has everything. (LW 24:138-139, On John 14:20)

Ignatius, Who Saw His Martyrdom as God's Work to Spread the Gospel

Thus the dear martyrs viewed their suffering and torments in times past. We read of the martyr St. Ignatius, a disciple of the apostle St. John, that when he was to be taken to Rome to be thrown to the wild beasts which were let loose in the arena to tear the Christians to pieces for the purpose of providing an amusing spectacle, he said: "Let them come! I am God's kernel of grain. He must crush and grind me in the mill before He can use me."

Here is a fine Christian application of this text; its view of suffering is different from the one taken by flesh and blood, which cannot consider such suffering an act of God but regards it as the fury and wrath with which the devil murders and kills man. St. Ignatius, however, looks upon the terrible teeth of the wild lions and bears as nothing else than God's millstone with which he must be ground to powder in order that he may be prepared as a good cake for God. (LW 24:196, On John 15:2)

When the Bones Tremble, Faith Marches On

The end will come too. You have a calling and an excellent confession. This is the right article of faith—a great thing when one does battle with Satan and his angels. In it, the body does not suffer. Faith itself, rather, and hope suffer. In all other temptations, faith stands like a wall, and faith laughs. The bones are the things which suffer. But when the bones tremble, faith marches on with joy, as Agatha laughs and rejoices. Because her faith was in control, she did not suffer. But when our courage becomes weak, there is an immediate battle with demons. This encouragement to strengthen faith and hope is necessary to those who are in the Word. (LW 28:376, On 1 Timothy 6:12)

Physical Pain, Spiritual Joy

"That you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:13). You should rejoice even if you come into suffering and into the glowing fire. For although this is a physical suffering, it should be a spiritual joy, in order that you may rejoice forever. For this joy begins here in suffering and lasts forever. Otherwise he who does not bear his suffering with rejoicing, becomes sullen, and wants to be angry with God, will suffer here and will suffer there forever. Thus we read about the saintly martyrs that they approached their suffering cheerfully and in this way gained eternal joy. When St. Agatha, for example, had to lie in prison, she was as happy as if she were going to a dance. And the apostles went away rejoicing and thanked God that they were counted worthy to suffer for Christ's sake, as Acts 5:41 says. (LW 30:127, On 1 Peter 4:13)

Faith Upholds the Martyr

If a martyr is to withstand, he must not judge according to how he feels. Otherwise he despairs. Instead, he should say: "Even though I am aware of my sin, Jesus Christ intercedes, and He does not accuse us." His intercession must be grasped by faith, which senses in fact that Christ is accusing, but which expects in hope that Christ is interceding for it. In that death there will be life for me, for Christ is the Lord of death. (LW 29:11, On Titus 1)

The Church was at its Best in the Time of the Martyrs

You will understand, therefore, that whatever we do in this life which mortifies the flesh or quickens the spirit has to do with our baptism. The sooner we depart this life, the more speedily we fulfil our baptism; and the more cruelly we suffer, the more successfully do we conform to our baptism. Hence the church was at its best at the time when martyrs were being put to death every day and accounted as sheep for the slaughter [Ps. 44:22; Rom. 8:36], for then the power of baptism reigned supreme in the church, whereas today we have lost sight of this power amid the multitude of works and doctrines of men. For our whole life should be baptism, and the fulfilling of the sign or sacrament of baptism, since we have been set free from all else and given over to baptism alone, that is, to death and resurrection. (LW 36:69-70, On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church)

The Death of the Martyrs is a Heavenly Birthday

Therefore, the death of the dear saints is called a new birth, and their feast day is known in Latin as *natale*, that is, the day of their birth. (LW 42:99-100, Sermon on Preparing to Die)

We Who Enjoy the Fruit of the Martyrs will Have to Take Our Turn as Martyrs

It is high time that we earnestly pray God that He hallow His name. But it will cost blood, and those who enjoy the inheritance of the holy martyrs, the inheritance which was won with the blood of the martyrs, must in their turn take on the role of martyr. (LW 44:54, Treatise on Good Works)

Confidence in God's Grace is the Confidence of the Martyrs

For where there is such faith and confidence there is also a bold, defiant, fearless heart that risks all and stands by the truth, no matter what the cost, whether it is against pope or king, as we see that the dear martyrs did. For such a heart is satisfied and serenely sure that it has a gracious, kindly-disposed God. (LW 44:112, Treatise on Good Works)

The Christian is a Martyr on Earth

He [the Christian] lets anyone who will rob, take, cheat, scrape, devour, and rage—for the Christian is a martyr on earth. (LW 46:40, Admonition to Peace)

The Gospel is Always Persecuted. We Think of Our Time as that of the Martyrs

Although it is true that a few years ago many pastors did suffer great want, and many still do, that is due to the convulsions of our time: people are so wicked, ungrateful, and avaricious that they even persecute the Gospel. By this God is trying us to see whether we are upright and sincere. We must think of our time as being like that of the martyrs, for then, too, godly teachers suffered great want and poverty, as Paul himself boasts [2 Cor. 11:27], and Christ also prophesied in Matthew 9 [:15], "When the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast." This is the fasting that is true to the Gospel. Then, too, whenever God's Word has come forth hard times have almost always come with it. (LW 46:235, Sermon on Keeping Children in School)