

Toward a Scripture-Based Theology of Death in our Hymnody

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WE HAVE IT from Augustine of Hippo: *Qui cantat, bis orat*, meaning "To sing once is to pray twice," or as it is more often translated, "He who sings, prays twice." In our congregations, in our weekly worship services, we revel in songs of praise and thanksgiving. But what, and how, do we sing about death? How does the manner in which we customarily sing about death influence the way we think about death? Most importantly, how do these customs help—or hinder—us in our understanding of the Gospel? And finally, what do we need to do to better position ourselves to craft an approach to hymnody concerning death that deepens our faith rather than merely assuaging our fear?

My intention in pondering hymns of death is not to be morbid. Quite the opposite, in fact. I suggest that hymnody which remains truthful to the New Testament witness enables us to live *and* to die more fully in Christ. Contemporary hymnals, however, offer us few chances to sing about death truthfully. We would rather sing around it than about it.

Perhaps fear of utter negation fuels this reluctance. We are enjoined in Matthew 16:20 to store up for ourselves "treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal." But how often do we practice Jesus' prescription? Because our culture stakes so much on material acquisition, we are terrified by the prospect of nonexistence, in which everything we have worked for is suddenly removed.

This avoidance of the reality of death is a barometer of the age in which we live. As Jeffrey VanderWilt suggests in his essay "Singing about Death in American Protestant Hymnody," the language and images of death

in our hymns tend to reflect the attitudes toward death of the prevailing culture. As science becomes more adept at forestalling death, America has witnessed a marked shift from hymnody that deals directly with the contemplation and effects of death to that in which we seek above all to be comforted and consoled in the loss of loved ones, and in the prospect of the termination of our own mortal existence.¹

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Death as an intermediate condition

Our first step toward an embrace of hymnody that strengthens our faith lies in the need to come to terms honestly with what Scripture tells us about the condition of death—our death.

In his incisive little book *Life after Death*, Taito Almar Kantonen asserts that Christianity "not only affirms the reality of death but also looks upon death as an enemy to be overcome. Then it goes on to affirm that in the conflict between life and death the decisive battle has already been fought and won. This took place when Christ died

and rose from the dead. Upon this one event, the resurrection of Christ, hinges the whole Christian message and the whole Christian hope."²

As Kantonen makes clear, this sequence can only unfold if we first affirm the reality of death—both Christ's and ours. If Jesus did not really, truly die, of what significance is the Resurrection? And where we are concerned, neither the widely-held view that the departed go directly to heaven or hell, nor the misconception that the human soul continues to live on in some kind of immortal existence apart from the body, accurately reflects the teaching of the Bible.³

Instead, he emphasizes, Scripture indicates the existence of an "intermediate condition between the death of an individual and the general resurrection of the dead." These include references to death as a form of sleep and as a time of waiting. The following passages use the Greek *koimaomai*, meaning "sleep, fall asleep, die": Matthew 27:52-53 ("many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised"), John 11:11 ("Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him"), Acts 7:60 (Stephen: "Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died."), 1 Thessalonians 4:15 and 1 Corinthians 11:30 ("For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died/fallen asleep"), and 1 Corinthians 15:6 ("Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died/fallen asleep"), 15:18 ("Then those also who have died/fallen asleep in Christ have perished"), and 15:20 ("But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died/fallen asleep"). Reference to death as a time of waiting include 1 Thessalonians 4:15, Hebrews 11:40, and Revelation 6:9-11. We can also infer an intermediate condition from Jesus' Lukan saying "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43) and the parable in which Lazarus is "carried away by the angels to be with Abraham" (Luke 16:22).

Such a condition offers evidence of the New Testament teaching that "the new creation has already begun and provides the believer with unbreakable union with Christ."⁴ It also underscores the Johannine assertion (John 3:36 and 11:26) that "eternal life" is a product of the present, not of the future, and the Pauline contention that believers rise with Christ into newness of life. The Holy Spirit provides the link between eternal life as a present possession and its complete consummation in the future. "He (sic) is the 'earnest' of the future inheritance, the first installment of what is to follow," Kantonen writes. "*Thus the ultimate victory, the resurrection from the dead, is the climax of the work of the Spirit which is already going on.... The Spirit binds believers to their Lord and to one another with ties of faith and love which death cannot sever.*"⁵ (Romans 8:11 and 8:38-39)

Kantonen pulls these observations into a series of "basic truths of which the Christian believer can have no doubt." Three prove central to our discussion of a theology of death:

Those who are in Christ continue to be in Christ after death. Death cannot bring about a separation (Romans 8:38-39). Whether we live or die, we are his (Romans 14:8). The blessed dead are with Christ, and, after the removal of earthly limitations, closer to him than before. The Holy Spirit, the resurrection power of Christ, continues to work in the blessed dead, to bind them to Christ, to transform the inner person into Christlikeness, and to

serve as the "earnest" (or down payment) of the final resurrection with Christ.

While the imperfection of the interim before Christ's return is indicated by the images of sleep and waiting, the Sabbath rest of God's people in the nearness of their Lord is already a foretaste of the awaited perfection.⁶

This helps us to see that neither of the two popular cultural misconceptions concerning death—the polar opposites of nonexistence and immortality—embody the true Christian response to death. Concerning the former, Kantonen writes that "natural life as we now know it, body-motivated-by-soul, has come to an end. But the new life in Christ, created and sustained by the Holy Spirit, does not come to an end. *Since Christ lives and they who have fallen asleep in him continue to share his life, they cannot be nonexistent.*"⁷

And of the latter, it is important to emphasize that this repudiation of non-existence does not mean we are immortal. As the writer of 1 Timothy states, it is Christ alone who is immortal (1 Tim. 6:16). The Christian looks to Jesus Christ, the conqueror of death, for deliverance. "He (sic) does not put his trust in the power of his own 'immortal soul' to resist death but in the power of Christ's resurrection given to him by the indwelling Spirit." Kantonen refers to this as "alien" immortality—that which is not an inherent possession of soul but rather "put on from the outside" as a result of the decisive victory over death effected by God through Christ.⁸ This "alien" immortality, Kantonen concludes, is dependent on the consummation of God's plan in the resurrection of the dead and the dawn of a new creation. "For this we wait, and for this the dead also wait."⁹

This waiting period can be understood as one aspect of what Oscar Cullman describes as "an interim time" between Christ's resurrection and the consummation of all things. Cullman avers that "the belief that in Christ the resurrection is achieved is the starting-point for all Christian living and thinking. When one starts from this principle, then the chronological tension between 'already fulfilled' and 'not yet consummated' constitutes the essence of Christian faith."¹⁰

Martin Luther writes clearly of the way in which the Holy Spirit continues to work, even after death, until all is perfected:

For creation is now behind us, and redemption has also taken place, but the Holy Spirit continues his work without ceasing until the Last Day, and for this purpose he has appointed a community on earth, through which he speaks and does all his work. For he has not yet gathered together all of this Christian community, nor has he completed the granting of forgiveness. Therefore we believe in him who daily brings us into this community through the Word, and imparts, increases, and strengthens faith through the same Word and the forgiveness of sins. *Then when his work has been finished and we abide in it, having*

died to the world and all misfortune, he will finally make us perfectly and eternally holy. Now we wait in faith for this to be accomplished through the Word.¹¹

Luther considered the state of death to be not one of negation but, in keeping with the New Testament witness, one of sleep in which the soul slumbers “between heaven and earth” and is awakened on the last day. “What he meant,” writes Bernhard Lohse, “is that those who one day waken will have no idea at all as to how long they slept or where they were: ‘So also death is called Sleep in Scripture (Luther writes). For just as one who does not know how it is that he (sic) sleeps and comes to morning unawares when he wakes, so we who suddenly arise in the Last Day will not know how we died and came through death.’”¹²

Singing what we believe, and believing what we sing

As musicians of the church, we understand well the critical role that hymnody plays in the shaping and nurturing of our beliefs. Paul testifies in Romans 10:9 that “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” This leads to his great pronouncement in Romans 10:17 that “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” So it is with hymnody: We sing what we believe, and believe what we sing.

In *The Faith We Sing*, S. Paul Schilling offers a series of welcome reminders of the critical role hymnody plays in our worship life as a medium for sharing, proclaiming and strengthening our faith.¹³

The attainment of a sense of reality in worship requires understanding of the beliefs articulated in the hymns sung as well as in other parts of the liturgy. If the words used do not say what those who utter them really believe, the whole proceeding becomes a sham. If the words are needlessly ambiguous, they cannot mediate effectively a consciousness of God’s presence. Truly to “worship the Lord with gladness” (Psalm 100:2) requires that what we sing be true to God’s character and God’s aims for human life.

Because hymns express religious convictions in a form used by large numbers of people, they are an indispensable vehicle for teaching Christian faith and life. Because hymns link ideas with emotion, they possess a special ability for teaching Christian truth. Music has a distinctive capacity to touch the feelings, and this is accentuated when music is a channel for meanings expressed in rich poetic language.

The use of poetic imagery, especially metaphorical language, enables hymns to deepen insight and enrich understanding in ways not readily accessible through lit-

eral prose alone.

When hymns voice the gospel effectively, they play an important part in the church’s evangelical witness. What hymns may have to say to those ranging from skeptics to sincere seekers may make a real difference in their response to the appeal of the message declared.

For this reason it is imperative that attention be closely paid to the content of what is being sung. Often people are attracted by messages of simple reassurance, which make the Christian way falsely easy, and which ignore the breadth of the New Testament. Hymns that offer only an abbreviated version of the gospel do not produce converts equipped to bring the healing, transforming love of God to a broken world.¹⁴

A survey of some of today’s hymnals reveals little if any exploration of the New Testament witness concerning the condition of death. Much of what our hymn books contain under this and related headings (funerals, heaven) actually serves to deflect our attention from a direct contemplation of the condition of death. We focus instead on our final destination: “...land me safe on Canaan’s side,”¹⁵ “...guide my feet, hold my hand...lead me home,”¹⁶ “...when death’s cold sullen stream shall o’er me roll...oh, bear me safe above, a ransomed soul!”¹⁷ We seek find comfort in the reassurance that Jesus is with us no matter what: “When I walk through the shades of death, your presence is my stay; one word of your supporting breath drives all my fears away.”¹⁸ The hymn books of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (*Lutheran Service Book*, 2006, and particularly *The Lutheran Hymnal*, 1941)

are not reluctant to address the topic of death, and the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) includes sixteen hymns under the topical heading of “Death.” But the tendency in most of today’s hymnals is to euphemize the subject or avoid it altogether. How much easier it is, these publications implicitly tell us, to sing about praise and thanksgiving! *Worship & Rejoice*, compiled by Hope Publishing Company and a reliable bellwether of contemporary American hymnic practice, contains four full columns in its topical index—in fine print—listing hymns devoted to “Praise of God.” Other categories brimming with entries include “Thanksgiving & Gratitude”, “Trust,” “Witness,” “Prayer,” and “Word & Teaching.” But there is no category in *Worship & Rejoice* for “Death,” or even the suggestion of areas in which one might search to find such hymns.

Nor do other mainstream publications—*The Hymnal* 1982, *The New Century Hymnal* (1995) or *This Far by Faith* (1999)—offer such topical categories. *With One Voice* (1995) does marginally better: for hymns addressing death, we are told to “see Heaven/Eternal Life, Christian

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Hope, Burial.” But the number of entries under “Burial” is scant, and most simply remind us that, by virtue of Jesus’ example, eternal life will be ours as well and that Jesus will be there waiting for us. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006) further reduces these options. The topical index under “Death” directs us to “see Heaven, Funeral,” with no entry for “Burial.” Yet of the fifteen hymns listed in the former category and twenty-five in the latter (some are duplications), none addresses the condition of death—that state in which we remain, Scripture tells us, until we are all raised on that last day. In all our fearful our contemplation of death, isn’t this what we need help with? Isn’t this where our hymnody could serve as a vast well by which the roots of our faith may be watered? Of being raised thus in glory there is no doubt, all followers of Christ know well. So why do most of today’s songs serve only to reinforce that of which believers are already certain?

With this in mind, let us examine a cross-section of hymnody in current usage first for what is conveyed about death—first those hymns which serves only to veil or obscure what the New Testament actually says about our death, and next those hymns which serve to deepen our grounding in that scriptural witness.

One shortcoming in many hymns commonly assumed to be “about” death is that they collapse to two dimensions the depiction of the individual’s progress from death to resurrection: The path from earthly life to heavenly life becomes an effortless, instantaneous move from Point A to Point B. The metaphoric immediacy of bliss, this short-circuiting of the cross and Holy Saturday, makes it possible for people to avoid the helplessness of being cast entirely on the mercy of God in Christ at death, in which we await the Last Day in the “sleep” of which the New Testament speaks. Examples from popular hymns include:

My Faith Looks Up to Thee

4.
When ends life’s transient dream,
when death’s cold, sullen stream
shall o’er me roll;
blest Savior, then, in love
fear and distrust remove;
oh, bear me safe above,
a ransomed soul!

Ray Palmer, 1808–1887

Guide Me Ever, Great Redeemer

3.
When I tread the verge of Jordan,
bid my anxious fears subside;
death of death and hell’s destruction,
land me safe on Canaan’s side.
Songs and praises, songs and praises,
I will raise forevermore,

I will raise forevermore.

William Williams, 1717–1791

Similarly, other hymns portray the soul as soaring or flying up to God at the time of death:

Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me

4.
While I draw this fleeting breath,
when mine eyelids close in death,
when I soar to worlds unknown,
see thee on thy judgment throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee.

Augustus M. Toplady, 1740–1778

I’ll Fly Away

1.
Some glad morning when this life is o’er,
I’ll fly away;
To a home on God’s celestial shore,
I’ll fly away.

Refrain:

I’ll fly away, O glory,
I’ll fly away;
When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,
I’ll fly away.

2.
When the shadows of this life have grown,
I’ll fly away;
Like a bird from prison bars has flown,
I’ll fly away.

3.
Just a few more weary days and then,
I’ll fly away;
To a land where joys shall never end,
I’ll fly away.

Albert E. Brumley, 1905–1977

This understanding of death as immediate gateway to heaven lays the ground for an outright idealizing of death, as a body of hymns, primarily from the nineteenth century and earlier, show. These depict death as an appealing alternative to a life that is burdened with endless toil. As Jeffrey VanderWilt puts it, “One must therefore ask, if our hymnody depicts death so appealingly and life so unattractively, is our singing about death nourishment for faith or an invitation to escape from the struggles we face in life?”¹⁹ Hymns in this vein include:

Shall We Gather at the River?

3.
Ere we reach the shining river,
Lay we every burden down;
Grace our spirits will deliver,
And provide a robe and crown.

Refrain:

Yes, we'll gather at the river,
The beautiful, the beautiful river;
Gather with the saints at the river
That flows by the throne of God.

Robert Lowry, 1826–1899

Oh, How Blest Are You

1.
Oh, how blest are you whose toils are ended,
Who through death have to our God ascended!
You have arisen

From the cares which keep us still in prison.

2.

We are still as in a dungeon living,
Still oppressed with sorrow and misgiving;
Our undertakings
Are but toils and troubles and heart breakings.

Simon Dach,
1605–1659, tr. H.W. Longfellow

This Body in the Grave We Lay

4.

All trials and all griefs are past,
a blessed end has come at last.
Christ's yoke was borne with ready will;
who dieth thus is living still.

Michael Weisse, c. 1480–1524

May Choirs of Angels Lead You

3.

As angels gave poor Lazarus
from all his ills release,
so may they give you welcome
to everlasting peace.

Latin; tr. F. Bland Tucker (1895–1984)

Another way in which popular hymnody fails to deepen our understanding of the New Testament witness on death concerns the emphasis, at the expense of a fuller contemplation of the condition of death, on the simple assurance that Jesus will be at our side to guide and comfort us. One example of a hymn of this type is:

Safe in the Arms of Jesus

1.

Safe in the arms of Jesus, safe on His gentle
breast,
There by His love o'ershaded, *sweetly my soul*
shall rest.

Hark! 'tis the voice of angels, borne in a song to
me.

Over the fields of glory, over the jasper sea.

Fanny Crosby, 1820–1915

The issue is not Jesus' presence or the lack of it, for he tells his disciples in unequivocal terms that "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20), but one of breadth. How infinitely richer our faith might become if we could explore through poetry and song the prospect of the deepening, in death, of the union with Jesus that was initiated through our baptism!

In this regard I suggest with trepidation that Psalm 23 may actually limit us theologically when used as the primary text in matters of a Christian death. Yes, these verses affirming Jesus' constant presence and the promise of eternal life have consoled countless mourners from all walks of life across the ages, and constitute the best-loved of biblical passages. But should they have the last word on a genuinely Christian understanding of the reality of death? A fuller appreciation of Jesus' activity would be found in texts that embody the understanding that Jesus Christ, "the entire person, God and human being, descended to hell after his burial, conquered the devil, destroyed the power of hell, and took from the devil all his power,"²⁰ and that "our Lord Jesus Christ will return on the Last Day to judge, to raise all the dead, to give eternal life and eternal joy to those who believe and are elect,"²¹ as the Lutheran confessions teach us.

Toward Scripture-based hymnody

There is no better place to position ourselves for a Scripture-based theology of death in our hymnody than at the threshold of Martin Luther's "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice." Here Luther articulates the entirety of the New Testament teachings on life, death and eternal life into a series of elegant, eloquent verses.

Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice

1.
Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice,
with exultation springing,
and, with united heart and voice
and holy rapture singing,
proclaim the wonders God has done,
proclaim the vict'ry God has won,
how precious was our ransom!

2.
Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay,
death brooded fiercely o'er me,
sin was my torment night and day;
in sin my mother bore me.
My own good works all came to naught,
free will against God's judgment fought,
so firmly sin possessed me.

3.
O God, you saw my deep distress
before the world's foundation,
and, with your mercy measureless,
you planned for my salvation.
You turned to me a father's heart;
you did not choose the easy part,
but gave your dearest treasure.

4.
You said to your beloved Son:
"Tis time to have compassion.
Then go, bright jewel of my crown,
and bring to all salvation;
from sin and sorrow set them free;
slay bitter death for them that they
may live with you forever."

5.
The Son obeyed your gracious will,
was born of virgin mother;
and, your good pleasure to fulfill,
he came to be my brother.
His royal pow'r disguised he bore,
a servant's form, like mine, he wore,
to lead the devil captive.

6.
To me he said: "Stay close to me,
I am your rock and castle.
Your ransom I myself will be;
for you I strive and wrestle.
The foe will shed my precious blood;
all this I suffer for your good;
my life o'er death will triumph.

7.
"Now to my Father I depart,
from earth to heav'n ascending,
and, gracious wisdom to impart,
the Holy Spirit sending,
who will in trouble comfort you,
will teach you well, your faith renew,
and in all truth will guide you.

8.
"What I on earth have done and taught
guide all your life and teaching;
so shall the glorious reign of God
increase, the whole world reaching.
Let none the gospel gift impede;
I make you free; be free indeed!
This final word I leave you."

Martin Luther, 1483–1546

As we sing this hymn, we affirm our conviction concerning the person and work of Jesus as the son of God who, born in human form, battled death on our behalf and through his conquest of death set us free from the power of death. We are reminded that "the goal of Christology is soteriology, as conversely soteriology has its basis in Christology."²²

Securely positioned, then, what hymns may we identify that deepen our grounding in the New Testament witness concerning death?

First and foremost is Martin Schalling's "Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart." There is no clearer or more utterly convincing articulation of the Christian's attitude to his or her condition, and to what lies ahead, than in these soaring verses.

Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart

3.
Lord, let at last thine angels come,
to Abr'ham's bosom bear me home,
that I may die unfearing;
and in its narrow chamber keep
my body safe in peaceful sleep
until thy reappearing.
And then from death awaken me,
that these mine eyes with joy may see,
O Son of God, thy glorious face,
my Savior and my fount of grace.
Lord Jesus Christ,
my prayer attend, my prayer attend,
and I will praise thee without end!

Martin Schalling, 1532–1608; tr.
Catherine Winkworth, 1829–1878

Here we meet with the most persuasive, deeply affecting articulation in all hymnody of the condition in which the soul rests in death. Its power lies not only in Schalling's beautiful language (conveyed through Catherine Winkworth's breathtakingly faithful translation), but in its deep-rootedness in the New Testament. For here Schalling transforms Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 into the greatest jewel in Protestant hymnody's crown. Small wonder that Johann Sebastian Bach would choose to close his *St. John Passion* with precisely these verses, or that Walter R. Bouman would conclude his last sermon with the very same.²³

Other hymns in general usage address the condition of death as one of sleep, and the Holy Spirit as the agent which accompanies the human soul through death (italics added for emphasis):

In Peace and Joy I Now Depart

1.

In peace and joy I now depart
as God is willing,
and faith fills all my mind and heart,
calming, stilling.
*God the Lord has promised me
that death is but a slumber.*

Martin Luther, 1483–1546,
based on the *Nunc dimittis*

All Glory Be to God on High

4.

O Holy Spirit, perfect gift,
who brings us consolation:
to men and women saved by Christ
assure your inspiration.
*Through sickness, need, and bitter death,
grant us your warm, life-giving breath;
our lives are in your keeping. Amen.*

Nikoalus Decius, 1490–1541

Jesus Lives, My Sure Defense

1.

Jesus lives, my sure defense
and my everlasting Savior!
Knowing this, my confidence
rests in hope and will not waver,
though the night of death be fraught
still with many an anxious thought.

3.

No, too closely am I bound
unto him by hope forever;
faith's strong hand the rock has found,
grasped it, and will leave it never;
*even death now cannot part
from its Lord the trusting heart.*

4.

I am flesh and must return
unto dust, whence I am taken.
*But these eyes my Lord will know
when from death I shall awaken,
with my Savior to abide
in his glory, at his side.*

Berlin, 1653;
tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1829–1878, alt.

Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word

3.

O Comforter of priceless worth,
send peace and unity on earth;
support us in our final strife
and lead us out of death to life.

Martin Luther, 1483–1546;
tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1829–1878

Lost in the Night

3.

Sorrowing wand'ers, *in darkness yet dwelling,*
dawned has the day of a radiance excelling,
death's deepest shadows forever dispelling.
Christ is coming soon! Christ is coming soon!

4.

Light o'er the land of the needy is beaming;
rivers of life through its deserts are streaming,
bringing all peoples a Savior redeeming.
Come and save us soon! Come and save us soon!

Finnish song;
tr. Olav Lee, 1859–1943, alt.

(N.B. This hymn, I believe, can be read from the perspective of the departed—as well as from the perspective of those who are still alive in their mortal bodies.)

When Long Before Time

6.

To you, God the Singer, our voices we raise,
to you, Song Incarnate, we give all our praise,
to you, Holy Spirit, our life and our breath,
be glory for ever, *through life and through death.*

Peter W. A. Davison, b. 1936

Thy Holy Wings

3.

Oh, wash me in the waters of Noah's cleansing flood.

Give me a willing spirit, a heart both clean and good.

Oh, take into thy keeping thy children great and small,

And while we sweetly slumber, enfold us one and all

Carolina Sandell Berg (1832–1903)
tr. Gracia Grindal, b. 1943

I Know of a Sleep in Jesus' Name

1.

I know of a sleep in Jesus' name,

A rest from all toil and sorrow;

Earth folds in its arms my weary frame

And shelters it till the morrow;

With God I am safe until that day

When sorrow is gone forever.

Magnus B. Landstad, 1802–1880

All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night

3.

Teach me to live, that I may dread

the grave as little as my bed.

Teach me to die, that so I may

rise glorious at the awesome day.

Thomas Ken, 1637–1711

(N.B.: While this hymn does not actually address death as sleep, Ken's equation of the grave with one's bed is helpful as a way to think of death as sleep.)

For further affirmation of the idea of death as a form of sleep—a state which, granted, we cannot comprehend with our senses but a *state of being* nonetheless—we look to 1 Corinthians 15. There with uncanny resourcefulness Paul invokes the imagery of a seed which is planted in the ground, “a physical body,” and “is raised a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:44) to illustrate that the Triune God is at work in and on us, in death, in ways that we cannot comprehend with our logical minds.

Explaining how the dead are raised, Paul asserts—rather impatiently—that “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.” (1 Cor. 15:36–38) Delving deeper into the image of the seed, we realize that the seed must necessarily lie in the ground as the powers of life—moisture, soil, light—work on it to pre-

pare it for its rebirth in an utterly new (but not foreign) form. “So it is with the resurrection of the dead,” Paul states (1 Cor. 15:42).

Thus we may turn fearlessly toward death in our hymnody and sing of it not as a grim subject that yields only negation, nor as a cheerful continuation of this life, but as a state of the fullest baptismal union with Christ during which God continues, through the Holy Spirit, to make good on the promise of hope that lies at the heart of the gospel. Having invoked Dr. Bouman's last sermon once, we may return to it again for further inspiration:

The gospel is not an idea, for example, that God loves us, although that is true. The gospel is good news, it is the announcement that something good and absolutely decisive for the universe has happened. The Christian good news is simply: Jesus is risen! That is good news because it means that death no longer has power over him. Jesus, not death, will have the last word. But the resurrection of Jesus was not personal vindication. He has become the first fruits of all that sleep. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive. He will reign until he has put all things under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. And then God will be everything in everyone. (1 Cor. 15:22–28)

Note that this is a vision for the future and it beckons us to follow it. Of course Jesus is also about the past, our past, the world's past. There on the cross he takes sin and evil and death into God's own being and history, where it is overcome forever. But the gospel is first and foremost a vision for the future. Because Jesus is risen, everything has changed radically. We are set free from serving the powers of death with our lives, our fears, our policies. We are set free from having to protect ourselves at whatever cost to others. We are set free from the dreadful necessity to grab all the gusto we can because we only go around once. We are set free from the compulsion to cling to every day and hour of life in this world.

...We are called to love the world, to want clean air and water for everyone, to give ourselves into the service of peace instead of blindly following our leaders in senseless wars, to commit to the cause of justice especially where our institutions and our country are guilty of injustice. That is a big order. But you are set free to pursue it by the resurrection of Christ, who has put an end to the dominion of death. We are free for the battle because the victory is already won.²⁴

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1
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2
Taito Almar Kantonen, *Life after Death*. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 29.

3
Ibid., 31.

4
Ibid., 32.

5
Ibid., 30–31; italics added.

6
Ibid.

7
Ibid., 36; italics added.

8
Ibid.

9
Ibid., 37.

10
Oscar Cullman, *Immortality of the Soul, or Resurrection from the Dead?* (London: The Epworth Press, 1958), 43.

11
From Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Creed in his Large Catechism, found in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 439.61–62.

12
Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 326.

13
S. Paul Schilling, *The Faith We Sing* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983).

14
Ibid., paraphrased from 27–28.

15
William Williams, 1717–1791, "Guide me ever, great Redeemer" (v. 3).

16
Thomas A. Dorsey, 1899–1993, "Precious Lord, take my hand" (v. 3).

17
Ray Palmer, 1808–1887, "My faith looks up to thee" (v. 4)

18
Isaac Watts, 1674–1748, "My Shepherd, you supply my need" (v. 2).

19
Mouw and Noll, 199.

20
Solid Declaration, Article IX; Kolb and Wengert, 635.2

21
The Augsburg Confession, Article XVII; *ibid.*, 50.1–2; see also the Apology of the AC, Article XVII, *ibid.*, 233.

22
Lohse, 224.

23
Dr. Bouman's sermon, delivered on May 18, 2005, may be found online at <http://www.trinitylutheranseminary.edu/Worship-Music/Sermons/>.

24
Bouman, *op. cit.*

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