

The Festival of Good Friday
29 March 2013
Concordia Lutheran Mission
Terrebonne, Oregon

“God’s Death on the Cross Converts Death to Mere Sleep from which Christians will Awaken on the Last Day.”

When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said,
It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.

John 19:30

Introduction

In this remarkably simple sequence, Christ has converted death into mere sleep. But how so? Death means the settling in of the eternally abiding wrath of God. But what happened on the Cross? Christ suffered the eternally abiding wrath of God incumbent upon all men because of their sin for them when He cried out, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken Me?”¹, and then proceeded to expire, i.e., to die. So, because that constituent component of death, namely, the settling in of the abiding wrath of God, is removed, then, death becomes no longer death but mere sleep.

From sleep one arises. From death no one arises. But Christ rose from the dead on the Third Day. Hence, we see proof that Christ, who is God, converted death into sleep because He suffered the sting of death, namely, the settling in of the eternally abiding wrath of God before He died and, as expected according to the Gospel, awakened from sleep on the third day.

And so all Christians will awaken from the sleep of death on the last day because Christ has communicated to them by the Gospel His experience of converting death into sleep. Through the Gospel, all Christians will awaken from death on the last day to live in everlasting glory with our God and Savior. Good Friday, therefore, is Good indeed.

I. Because Christ Suffers the Sting of Death before He Dies, He Converts Death to Mere Sleep.

A. Christ suffers a truly human death because He suffers the separation of body and soul.

¹St. Matthew 27:46.

Christ suffered a truly human death because He suffered the separation of body and soul. The separation of body and soul is the definition of human death. Solomon writes:

Then shall the dust return to the earth² as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.³

And Christ suffered the separation of body and soul on the Cross. The Apostle St. John writes:

When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.⁴

And Christ is God in the flesh. The Apostle St. John writes:

And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.⁵

What we see here in the death of Christ is the death of God. God Himself has personally undergone and experienced human death because Christ is God in the flesh. The Lutheran Church confesses:

We Christians must know that if God is not also in the balance, and gives the weight, we sink to the bottom with our scale. By this I mean: If it were not to be said [if these things were not true], God has died for us, but only a man, we would be lost. But if "God's death" and "God died" lie in the scale of the balance, then He sinks down, and we rise up as a light, empty scale. But indeed He can also rise again or leap out of the scale; yet He could not sit in the scale unless He became a man like us, so that it could be said: "God died," "God's passion,"

²“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.” **Genesis 3:19.**

³**Ecclesiastes 12:7.**

⁴**St. John 19:30.**

⁵**St. Matthew 1:21, 23.**

*“God’s blood⁶,” “God’s death.” For in His nature God cannot die; but now that God and man are united in one person, it is correctly called God’s death, when the man dies who is one thing or one person with God.*⁷

Because God became man and suffered the severing and sundering of body and soul, God truly experienced a human death in Christ Jesus.

B. The sting of death is the settling in of the eternally abiding wrath of God.

But the mere moment of expiration is not – dreadful as that is – the sting of death. Rather, the sting of death is the settling in of the eternally abiding wrath of God upon the individual. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

The sting of death *is* sin; and the strength of sin *is* the law. But thanks *be* to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.⁸

The Lutheran Church confesses:

And death itself serves this purpose, namely, to abolish this flesh of sin, that we may rise absolutely new. Neither is there now in the death of the believer, since by faith he has overcome the terrors of death, that sting and sense of wrath of which Paul speaks 1 Cor. 15, 56: *The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the Law.* This strength of sin, this sense of wrath, is truly punishment as long as it is present; without this sense of wrath, death is not properly punishment.⁹

The sting of death is the settling in of the eternally abiding wrath of God upon the moment of expiration.

C. God converts death into mere sleep by atoning for the sins of men on the Cross.

⁶“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” **Acts 20:28**, underscore added.

⁷The Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article VIII. Of the Person of Christ.⁴⁴, underscore added.

⁸**I Corinthians 15:56.**

⁹The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article VI: Of Confession and Satisfaction.^{56. 57, Triglotta}, p. 299.

And Christ suffered not only human suffering and death on the Cross, but He also suffered the sting of death, namely, God's eternally abiding wrath over sin. Christ cried out from the Cross:

My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?¹⁰

To be forsaken of God is the sting of death. The Rev. Dr. George Stoeckhardt writes:

The old Theologians assert that Christ actually endured the torments of hell, when He uttered those mysterious words: "Why has Thou forsaken Me?" ... By that outcry Christ asserts that He was really forsaken of God, forsaken, as only the damned in hell are forsaken. This marks the peak of His suffering. This indicates the height of His anguish. God had withdrawn from Him all help and protection and had delivered him up to darkness and death. At the same time, God had withdrawn from Him every token of grace and comfort. He was totally forsaken of God. Christ no longer saw or felt a ray of divine mercy. He was now actually and really suffering the pangs of hell, which otherwise only those experience who are banished to that place of eternal torment. As men live here in time, they may already feel the crushing burden of God's wrath and curse resting upon them, yet there are always some evidences of God's goodness at hand, such as the light they see and the air they breathe. However, in hell such evidences of God's kindness have vanished altogether. They see and feel only God's burning wrath and unabating fury. Such was the condition that Christ was in, when on the cross He cried: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Christ felt Himself completely forsaken."¹¹

And Christ suffered the sting of death because He bore the guilt of our sins. The prophet Isaiah writes:

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he *was* wounded for our transgression, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. ... Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put *him* to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see *his* seed, he shall prolong *his* days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, *and* shall

¹⁰**St. Matthew 27:46.**

¹¹The Rev. Dr. George Stoeckhardt, *Lectures on Select Psalms*, tr. the Rev. Dr. H. W. Degner, Ft. Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, pp. 68, 67.

be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.¹²

But how could Christ's agony on the Cross remove the sting of death because Christ, while suffering immensely, did not suffer the eternity of the sting of death? The answer is: *Christ did in fact suffer the eternity of the sting of death not because of the time involved but because of the Majesty of His Person who suffers, which Majesty is infinite and eternal.* The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper writes:

Others object: Christ did not in fact suffer eternal damnation; His suffering therefore was not vicarious. ... Scripture teaches plainly that the very punishment which we should have suffered on account of our sins was meted out to Christ. The very curse which was denounced against sinful man ("Cursed is everyone that continueth not, etc.," Gal. 3:10), fell in its full weight upon Christ: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the Law, *being made a curse for us*" (Gal. 3:13). Yes, the suffering of Christ was of comparatively short duration. But observe God's method of computation. When Scripture measures the value of Christ's Passion, it does so by the exalted dignity of the Sufferer. It was the suffering of the Son of God, 1 John 1:7: "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin." Acts 20:28: "His [God's] own blood." The teaching of the "orthodox theologians" that the brief suffering of Christ, as that of the Son of God, is equivalent to the eternal suffering of mankind is not a "dogmatic construction," but the doctrine of Scripture.⁴⁸[⁴⁸Dorscheus (in Baier, III, p. 87): "The eternity of human suffering is compensated for by the majesty and excellence of the Person (Christ)."] Christ "fully balanced the account," the settlement is "mathematically" correct as God views the matter.¹³

And notice something else curious about the death of Christ: *The order is reversed.* Christ first suffers the sting of death, then He expires. The Apostle St. John writes:

When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.¹⁴

What is finished? The sting of death is finished, just as Scripture had prophesied. The prophet Daniel writes of Christ bringing to an end the sting of death:

¹²**Isaiah 53:4-5, 10-11.**

¹³*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. II, p. 354.

¹⁴**St. John 19:30.**

Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy. Know therefore and understand, *that* from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince, *shall be* seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. And after three score and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself¹⁵: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof *shall be* with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined.¹⁶

When Christ said, “It is finished”, He speaks of finishing His Work to put an end to sin and to bring in everlasting righteousness. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.¹⁷

Where God’s wrath is removed over sin, there also the sting of death is removed. The Lutheran Church, following the Apostle St. Paul, confesses:

And death itself serves this purpose, namely, to abolish this flesh of sin, that we may rise absolutely new. Neither is there now in the death of the believer, since by faith he has overcome the terrors of death, that sting and sense of wrath of which Paul speaks 1 Cor. 15, 56: *The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the Law.* This strength of sin, this sense of wrath, is truly punishment as long as it is present; without this sense of wrath, death is not properly punishment.¹⁸

¹⁵Christ is not cut off “for Himself”, i.e. not for anything He did, but rather He is “cut off” for our sins, as the prophet Isaiah has already noted, **Isaiah 53:4-5, 10-11.**

¹⁶**Daniel 9:24-26.**

¹⁷**II Corinthians 5:21.**

¹⁸The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article VI: Of Confession and Satisfaction. 56. 57, *Triglotta*, p. 299. “The dying of Christians is no longer death in the full sense because they are delivered from the thing that makes death terrible – the *sensus irae divinae* [the sense of Divine wrath], as the Apology states Moreover, the essence of death is really the fact that if nothing intervenes, it is followed by ‘the second death’ (... Rev. 20:14), eternal torment. This consequence has been replaced in the case of Christians by its direct opposite. Through death they pass into life. Christ says of every believer (John 5:24) that he ‘hath ... everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed ... from death unto

And, as we noted, Christ reversed the order. First He suffered the sting of death, then He expired. For mortal men the order is first to expire, then, to suffer the sting of death, i.e. the settling in of the eternally abiding wrath of God. But now Christ has reversed the order for us: First He suffered the sting of death, then He expired. What does this mean? It means that He has converted death into mere sleep because that which makes death to be death, the sting of death, has been removed. The Apostle St. Peter writes that by His Work Christ has overcome death:

Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.¹⁹

And St. Paul, therefore, writes that Christ has converted death into mere sleep:

But now is Christ risen from the dead, *and* become the firstfruits of them that slept.²⁰

Luther writes:

Scripture has a lovely manner of speaking of death and the deceased ... Scripture does not call it death, but sleep We must henceforth learn a new speech and language in speaking of death and the grave ... That is not a human, earthly language, but a divine, celestial language. For the like you find in none of the books of all learned and wise on earth ... But among Christians this should be a familiar, common, and current speech....²¹

Christ proves by rising from the dead that He has transformed death into mere sleep from which He awakened gloriously on the third day. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where *is* thy sting? O grave, where *is* thy

life.’ ... Accordingly, we find Scripture with ... embellishing epithets, or euphemisms ... regarding the death of the believers, which the early teachers of the Church as well as Luther and our dogmaticians have compiled. ... Every Christian, and especially every teacher in the Church, ought to know them well and use them.” The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, pp. 510, 511, translation in brackets is mine.

¹⁹**Acts 2:24.**

²⁰**I Corinthians 15:20.**

²¹Quoted in the Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper’s *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p. 511, footnote 15.

victory? The sting of death *is* sin; and the strength of sin *is* the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.²²

II. Because God has Converted Death to Sleep, Christians will Awake from Death on the Last Day unto Life Eternal in Glory.

A. Men Gain Christ's Blessed Sleep through the Gospel.

Because Christ is the First-Fruit of them that sleep, then all men in Christ shall awaken from the sleep of death on the last day and rise bodily with bodies glorified like Christ's risen body unto life eternal. This blessed sleep and awakening Christ gives to us through the Gospel. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also *in the likeness* of his resurrection ...²³

B. All Christians, like Christ, shall awaken from the sleep of death unto life everlasting.

And because we have been planted into the same death that Christ enjoyed, then all Christians shall awaken from sleep on the last day to everlasting glory and bliss. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

²²**I Corinthians 15:54-57.**

²³**Romans 6:3-4.** The Gospel is God's Word and Sacraments. "But let us speak of the word *liturgy*. This word does not properly signify a sacrifice, but rather the public ministry, and agrees aptly with our belief, namely, that one minister who consecrates tenders the body and blood of the Lord to the rest of the people, just as one minister who preaches tenders the Gospel to the people, as Paul says, I Cor. 4, 1: *Let a man so account of us as the ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, i.e. of the Gospel and the Sacraments.* And 2 Cor. 5, 20: *We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in God's stead, be ye reconciled to God.* Thus the term *leitourgia* agrees aptly with the ministry." *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV. (XII.): Of the Mass, Of the Term Mass.* 80, 81, *Triglotta*, p. 411.

But now is Christ risen from the dead, *and* become the firstfruits of them that slept.²⁴

And we are risen from the dead not with the broken down body of sin, but with the glorious glorified body like Christ enjoys. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.²⁵

Conclusion

Because God, out of His incomparable and unfathomable kindness and mercy graced us with His suffering death for us, He has converted death into mere sleep. From death one never arises, but suffers eternal ruin, shame, and torment. But from sleep one arises and awakens refreshed.

And we awaken refreshed forever because we have shed this miserable flesh and gained glorious, resurrected bodies like Christ's, unto life eternal in Christ's glorious, blissful, joyful, and everlasting Kingdom.

Amen.

²⁴**I Corinthians 15:3.**

²⁵**Philippians 3:21.**