

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Last Sunday of the Church Year, November 24, 2013

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)
Hymns: 196, 615:1, 602, 394, 644.
Lessons: Isaiah 51:9-16, Colossians 1:9-14, Luke 7:1-10..
Sermon Text: John 11:21-27.
Sermon by Pastor M. H. Eibs

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Another year of God's grace for us undeserving people is coming to a close. This is the last Sunday in the Christian Church year. The end of the Church Year for the Christian should always be to him a reminder that another period of time has passed in which God in his infinite grace has given him an opportunity to do as the Psalmist says: "*Seek ye the Lord while He may be found.*" How have we made use of this time of grace in seeking the Lord? Have we properly used the means of grace, Word and Sacrament?

This is an appropriate question because the close of the Church Year also reminds us of the end of our earthly life, of our death. Death is for every person a stern reality that he has to reckon with sooner or later. St. Paul writes "*Death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.*" Romans 5:12. For every person death is unpleasant to think about, because death is unnatural. God created man in the beginning to live, not to die. For all people who are yet in their sins because they have not come to faith in Christ, death causes fear. And such unbelievers should indeed fear and tremble because death is for them the punishment for sin and a foretaste of eternal death in hell.

But, for believers in Christ Jesus, death is not a fearful thing at all, for they have the Gospel promise that all who believe in Christ shall not die eternally, but live in heaven. It is for the purpose of strengthening our faith in this promise and certain hope that we meditate on our text.

Let us learn about:

THE LORD'S COMFORT IN LIFE AND DEATH,

- 1. In sickness and sorrow God chastens us to test and strengthen our faith.**
- 2. Through death God takes all believers to life eternal.**

"Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." The Lord's chastening hand was evident in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in the little village of Bethany.

Lazarus had become sick and died. Before he died, Mary and Martha had sent a message to Jesus telling him: "*Behold, he whom Thou lovest is sick.*" When Jesus received the message he knew that Lazarus would die and that he would raise him up from the grave. He knew also that Lazarus' death and resurrection would serve to glorify himself as the Son of God. Therefore he said: "*This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.*" After receiving the message, Jesus waited two days and then started out for Bethany with his disciples. By the time he arrived in Bethany it was four days since Lazarus had died and was buried.

It was but natural that Martha and Mary were in deep sorrow when their brother died. Many of the Jews had come to the home to express their human sympathy. But the fact that sickness, death and, sorrow had come to Mary and Martha's home is not an indication that the Lord did not love them. This 11th chapter of St. John expressly says: "*Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.*" Just because Jesus loved these friends did he permit sorrow to enter their home. In his great love the Lord was chastening these friends of his for the purpose of testing and strengthening their faith. The Bible says: "*No chastening for the present seemeth to be*

joyous but grievous." We experience that in our lives as Christians. The Lord's chastening sometimes seems to be a very grievous thing, sometimes a heavy burden to bear. But the Bible also says: "***whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth.***"

The Lord chastens his dear believers with sickness, sorrow and other burdens for a very good purpose which shows his great love for us. The purpose is to test and strengthen our faith. Sometimes he sees that we are going astray from the path that leads to eternal life and he chastens us to lead us back to the right way. Sometimes we may tend to become carnally secure and he chastens us to humble us. Sometimes he has to teach us with chastening to trust in him more and not lean on our own understanding or rely upon our wisdom and strength. And sometimes he wants to teach us by chastening to take him at his Word and thus truly to fear, love and trust in him above all other things.

When Jesus arrived at Bethany Martha first met him and said: "***Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.***" Martha's words should not be considered as a complaint against the Lord, but rather an indication of her great sorrow. Yet her words seem to indicate that she had expected the Lord to come and heal Lazarus before he died. It was a weakness of faith on her part. She did not have the great faith of the Centurion who told Jesus concerning his servant: "***Speak the Word only, and my servant shall be healed.***" But we will not harshly accuse Martha for her statement, for we are only too often like her. We too are like Thomas who doubted the word of the disciples that Jesus had risen, and said: "***Except I see...I will not believe.***" If we had greater faith and trust in God's Word we would more readily believe and live according to God's wonderful promises in his Word. Therefore, we should pray: "***Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief.***"

The Lord Jesus did strengthen Martha's faith by his mere presence. When she saw Jesus her hope revived and she said: "***But I know that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it Thee.***" She believed that even now after he had died Jesus could revive her brother. Jesus further tested Martha's faith when he said: "***Thy brother shall rise again.***" Jesus did not say when her brother would rise again, now or at the last day. So Jesus tested Martha's faith. She answered: "***I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the Last Day.***" Thus she confessed her faith made stronger by the Lord. She did not demand that Jesus then and there restore her brother to life. Faith cannot demand what God has not specifically promised. That we leave to the Lord's will. But she was confident that her brother would rise again on the last day.

As Jesus had foretold, all these things were for his glorification. Jesus was glorified when Martha's faith was strengthened and she confessed belief in the resurrection on the last day. Jesus was also later glorified when many Jews believed on him as a result of the miracle of raising Lazarus from the grave. Jesus is also glorified and is well-pleased when through chastening our faith is made stronger and we confess our faith in him and trust his promises.

2.

Let us now learn about the Lord's comfort in death. Our text teaches us that through death God takes all believers to life eternal. "***Jesus said unto her, I am the Resurrection and the Life; he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.***" These words are most beautiful words of comfort as we look forward to the close of our earthly life. These words, of course, give comfort only to those who believe in Jesus. And what believers are to know about Jesus in order to have such comfort, Jesus tells us in our text: "***I am the Resurrection and the Life.***" This statement is so bold that only he who is God could make it. These words are spoken by him who in like manner said: "***I am the Bread of Life.***" "***I am the Light of the world.***" "***I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.***" Jesus can say this of himself because he is, as he says in the Bible, "***the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last.***" He says: "***I am the Son of God.***"

When Jesus Christ says that he is the "***Resurrection and the Life***", he is saying that he himself is the Source of Life. He created physical life in the beginning. He gives spiritual life to our souls. He also can give eternal life in heaven. Death has no power over Jesus. Therefore, all those who want life and would escape eternal death in hell must get that life through and from him.

This is true because Jesus is the only-begotten Son of the Father, the one and only Savior, who came into this world to be the Sin-bearer for all men. He is "***The Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the***

world." He is the One who was "*wounded for our transgressions..., bruised for our iniquities.*" He is the One who "*redeemed us from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us.*" These truths of redemption are made known to us in the Gospel, which was written as St. John says: "*that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, ye might have life through His name.*" So this Jesus can say in our text: "*He that believeth in Me though he were dead, yet shall he live.*" Believers in Jesus must also suffer death and leave this sinful world, but death cannot hold them. It has lost its power over them. Believers in Christ "*shall never die*", the Savior promises. They shall not die the eternal death in hell as unbelievers will. Temporal death is for them but the gateway to heaven where "*There shall be no more death.*"

Knowing this beautiful promise of the Gospel, who would not eagerly grasp it and confidently accept it by faith? But faith there must be. Faith is essential to salvation. Thus Jesus asked Martha: "*Believest thou this? She saith unto Him, Yea, Lord; I believe that Thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world.*" Martha believed by God's grace the beautiful Gospel message she heard from Jesus' lips. She made a beautiful confession of faith in Jesus Christ, her only Savior. Such faith in Christ is essential for us and for every one who seeks eternal life. It is not sin that causes eternal damnation in hell, because Jesus has won forgiveness of all sins for every sinner. But it is unbelief that damns to hell. Because people turn a deaf ear to the Gospel message, because in sinful pride and self-righteousness they reject the Savior's love and redemptive work, that is why they must suffer everlasting punishment in hell.

Surely, we all want to escape the bitter pains of eternal death. Surely we all want the comfort that Christ's promise in our text gives us. It changes our whole life and our outlook upon life. It teaches us to look upon this life as a sojourning for people who are pilgrims and strangers and who know that heaven is their real home. It teaches us to "*set our affections on things above, not on things on the earth.*" It teaches us to live only for our Savior and work zealously in his kingdom.

Therefore, blessed and happy are all they who confess in true faith: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness; just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true!" Amen.

(Originally preached November 24, 1957 by M. H. Eibs. Edited by Robert Mehlretter)