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We Conquer Death

By EDUARD ELLWEIN *

WHEN the golden sun emerges out of the ocean, he casts a shaft of his glorious light across the expanse of the water. The glorious reflection of an unspeakably greater light rests upon the Gospel of St. John: the certainty of our victory over death, the believer's assurance that he has conquered death and possesses eternal life as a present reality. To believe on the Son means to have eternal life. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth My Word and believeth on Him that hath sent Me hath everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life." (John 5:24; μεταβέβηκεν, this perfect tense has present meaning.) He who hears and believes Christ's Word is standing as it were on yonder shore. He has gone from death into life. The acceptance of the Word which is heard here and now is "the eschatological occurrence" (Hoskyns). It is true on the one hand that this present "eschatological occurrence" does not remove the expectations of the Last Day, the coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead, but actually enflames and brings to fever heat the *Maranatha*, because it is as it were a prelude to the ultimate resurrection (Calvin). But it is just as true, on the other hand, that the fourth Evangelist puts equal emphasis on that which takes place on this side of the grave in the believer who hears and accepts the Word of God. The final Judgment only reveals what is here and now a true reality. This mighty *cantus firmus* of the conquest of death rings through the 6th and 8th chapters of the Evangelist: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep My saying, he shall never see death" (John 8:51). In this word the Conqueror of death meets us, He who comes from eternity and who stands in the eternity of God "the

* Dr. Ellwein is professor of New Testament at *Augustana Hochschule, Neuendettelsau*. The article entitled *Todesüberwindung* appeared in *Evangelische Lutherische Kirchenzeitung*, November 15, 1952. Professor Ellwein is editor of the volume on St. John in the edition of Luther's sermonic and exegetical writings on the Gospels, entitled *Luthers Evangelienauslegung*. Dr. Ellwein maintains that those who charge Luther with a one-sided emphasis of "Pauline" theology as though he had no room for the Johannine *kerygma*, do not know Luther. The Managing Editor prepared the translation.

ἐγώ which Jesus as the Revealer utters is the 'yes' of the eternal Logos, who was in the beginning, the 'I' of the eternal Himself" (Bultmann).

Luther preached repeatedly on the Gospel lection for Judica Sunday (John 8:46-59), and it is interesting and profitable to see how the word of the victory over death is expanded and reflected in Luther's exposition. Whenever it was Luther's turn to preach on this particular Gospel lection, he sought new approaches to penetrate into the depths of this Gospel lection and so to interpret it for himself and his congregation that he would find comfort against the terrors of death. The question has been asked whether the thoughts of St. John appeared in Luther's sermons in a weakened form. In his sermons Luther places the emphasis sometimes on the one, sometimes on the other verse of this Gospel lesson. But in spite of the multiplicity of thoughts there is a centripetal force at work leading to the one central thought, namely: he who has accepted the Word of Christ will not see death eternally, because this is the Word of Him who has conquered death. We shall attempt in the following to organize systematically the tremendously rich content of Luther's sermons on this text in order to evaluate it in the light of St. John's Gospel.

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, that if a man keep My Word, he shall not see death eternally."

That is a glorious sermon and a gospel of extreme beauty and magnitude. These words preach a work of God which is inexpressible, namely, the redemption from death. This is only God's work.¹

What is the content of this word to which so great a promise is attached? This word is the fullness of the Gospel; it preaches Christ's righteousness, His Passion, His death. "Jesus Christ is my Righteousness. That is the truth." The Gospel portrays Him to us who has conquered death, sin, and the devil, or in the words of Luther:

Therefore whoever clings to this word, embraces and clings to the Lord Jesus, and through the Word he actually gains eternal liberation from death. Therefore it is a Word of life, and it is true; whosoever keeps it shall not see death eternally. . . . Where His words hold sway, there you remain unharmed through these words.²

That is why St. Paul calls the Word a power of God; that is:

The power of God conquers sin because it is the eternal righteousness; it conquers death because it is eternal life; it conquers the devil because God is the Lord of lords; it conquers hell because the Gospel is eternal salvation. Only believe on the Lord Jesus that He is your Redeemer (*Seligmacher*), and all this will be your own.³

This promise that whosoever keeps this Word shall not see death must be accepted unconditionally, for Christ's words that ye shall not die eternally are absolutely true.⁴ Therefore the Christian must keep these words in a good and honest heart, for the promises of Christ apply only to him who accepts them unconditionally.

We must strive and fight when sin would devour us, death oppress us, and hell condemn us. Then we must cling tenaciously to the Word and permit nothing to separate us from it.⁵

This word must surround and encase us in life and in death.⁶ Whoever clings to this word takes hold of Christ Himself, the Conqueror of death.⁷

Of course, this word does not exempt us from bodily death. Externally there is no difference between the death of an unbeliever and that of the Christian who in death clings to the Word and permits the Word to surround him completely. According to all appearance the Christians die and are buried. Nevertheless, there is an absolute difference in the nature and significance of death in each case. The Christian gently falls asleep and is granted to behold a beautiful dream.

Externally the Christian's death looks like that of the unbeliever, but internally there is as great a difference as there is between heaven and earth. For the Christian sleeps in death and thus goes through death into life. The unbeliever, however, departs from life to experience death eternally. For that reason some quake and doubt, despair, and become insane at the hour of death. Scripture speaks of death as a sleep, for while one is asleep, he does not know what is happening until he suddenly awakens again. So we, too, shall suddenly arise on Judgment Day without knowing how we entered into and came through death. . . . Death has become a sleep for me.⁸

When Luther speaks of the death of a Christian as sleep, he

means that the Christian does not taste nor see death, does not experience it, is not frightened by it, but enters death calmly and serenely. For death can do him no harm.⁹

There is nothing which a Christian needs to fear if he clings to the words: If any man keep My Word, he shall not see death eternally—on these words the entire Gospel rests—but in his death he enters a sleep, and in this sleep he passes on without having actually experienced death. Like Abraham he only knows of life.¹⁰

Christ's word and faith in this word works such a change that death becomes the death of death. This transformation is an incomparably great miracle. True, we must die and suffer death. But this is the miracle that he who clings to the Word of God shall not feel death, but go hence as in a sleep.¹¹ Death has lost every ounce of strength, and the Christian does not feel it. To feel death means no less than to despair.¹² Luther uses a rather strange picture to make clear what he has in mind: A person is on horseback in a thick fog and is unaware of the murderer who shoots the fatal bullet. The devil is a murderer, and like a highway robber he takes our life in such a way that we never know it. The Word makes us calm and serene.¹³

Of course, the sleep into which Christ's Word changes death, is a sleep of a very specific kind. In this sleep the Christian does not sink into the nothingness of total unconsciousness. On the contrary, asleep in Jesus, he sees the glory of the victory over death. As the body decays, the inner eye beholds God and in Him nothing but eternal life, and cannot see corporeal death at all. . . . All those who do not have the inner life nor the power of the Word see nothing but death and the terrors of hell. A person in a deep sleep is a good analogy. The body is listless. The soul, which in the meantime need not concern itself about the body at all, contemplates the beautiful dreams, finds its highest delight in them, and so completely ignores the body as though soul and body had nothing in common. During all this the body does what is proper for the body—it sleeps. Thus it will be in death. The soul will view the Word and rest solely in faith; the body, however, turns to dust and ashes.¹⁴ The godless who does not have the Word can

see nothing but death and decay, and depart in terror, not knowing whither he is going.¹⁵

Thus for the believer death is in reality no longer death. It is at best only "a painted death."¹⁶ "If we cling to the external word 'death,' it appears as though we would die; but in reality there is no death, but under and in this death is life itself."¹⁷ The Christians are truly alive now in the highest sense of the word. It is as though they have emerged from pitch-darkness and entered into the most brilliant light.¹⁸ Thus the believer conquers death through the Word of life; he dies nevermore, yes, he cannot die if he dies trusting the Word of Christ. He lives eternally; he completely ignores death.¹⁹

Whoever abides in the Word has no more sin, no death, no hell, no final Judgment; only life, only grace and mercy.²⁰

That is why the Christian dies with "calm fortitude" in the midst of death. The Word of Christ has become his "ark" in which he safely rides over death. Luther's advice is:

Strike out the verse: I die and know not when, I depart and do not know whither. Instead, you must sing: I know that I live and that I shall come to Christ. I know that life does not begin until after death.²¹

Through faith he is now already in life, and, dying, he goes through death into life, in brief, the dead live wherever they may be.²²

To round out the picture, Luther reminds us that everything depends upon faith, which trusts the Word of God and its promise. The firmer and deeper this faith is, the more peaceful is death. God's Word creates a peaceful life, grants a quiet death, and bestows eternal life.²³ Why? Because in death Christ Himself is present with His blessings. "No greater blessing can come to us in our death than that 'the Seed of Abraham' blesses us."²⁴ The only thing that counts is to look at Christ, for

Whoever is outside the Word, must die in terror. Therefore do not rationalize. With your whole heart say: "I believe on the Lord Jesus, God's Son. I know no more, and I do not want to know any more."²⁵

Thus we return again to the beginning. Blessed is he who believes the Word of Christ.

Cling to this Word, and pay no attention to specious counter-arguments. You dare not follow these, but must believe the Word. . . . Whenever danger confronts you, then listen to Christ's Word, and under no condition judge from your feelings. Your heart is a scoundrel, your thoughts are full of lies. But this word is true: "If a man keep My Word, he shall never see death." The heart of the Gospel is that you learn to keep this word in all honor and to boast of it. But this must be tried and experienced. The devil can easily lead a person from a sin, the size of a poppy seed, into despair. That is so because man judges according to his emotions. . . . For that reason we must cling to the Word with closed eyes. Contrary to our thoughts and emotions we must base ourselves on this word, cling to it, and not permit the enthusiasts who follow their own wisdom. This way, as Christ teaches, is the way to life. All other ways lead to death.²⁶

Thus far the attempt to trace Luther's interpretation of John 8:51 according to the several sermons copied by Rörer. Of course, this is barely an outline. However, it should be clear from the preceding discussion how Luther endeavored to interpret for himself and his hearers the testimony of the fourth Gospel concerning our victory over the last foe, death. If one attempts to test Luther's interpretation according to the witness of the Evangelist, then one is confronted by two facts: First, the testimony of the fourth Gospel is of an incomparably singular and unexplainable monumental greatness. After a quick start the Gospel takes us quickly to the highest peaks or down into the deepest depths of divine wisdom. It declines to enter into verbose expositions and presents what it has to say—and that applies also to the message concerning the conquest of death—in its full greatness and majesty to both reader and hearer. The message sparkles in its own light and glory in the very moment in which it is spoken. It is simplicity personified and extremely sparing in words in spite of its tremendously rich background. For example, one will look in vain for the thought which Luther developed in such detail concerning the sleep of the souls of those who have died in Christ. The Gospel of St. John has only an allusion to it, since according to John 11:11 Christ considers death only as a sleep.

Secondly, Luther is not only on the way to the heights of the Johannine proclamation, he also scales the heights. Again and

again we read sentences, words, thoughts, in which we find the testimony of the fourth Gospel concerning the conquest of death clearly stated and re-echoed. We see the light of yonder land, the reflection of its inexpressible glory. This is possible because contrary to the thousand and one objections of reason and because of the fear of death Luther always banks on the Word of Christ and nothing else. He clings to this Word with closed eyes and permits it to be the only reality in the midst of death. "For as Christ's Word speaks, thus it is, for He cannot lie nor deceive us." In the marvelous simplicity of faith he accepts the word of Christ without any diminution and repeats it again and again in his sermons so that it resounds in its full authority: "Whoever recognizes such a life in Christ and believes will go through death and will die never more, for this light of life will support him so that death cannot touch him. Although the body must die and decay, the soul does not experience death, because it is in this light, and through this light it is completely embraced in the life of Christ, and thus the light will shine for you and remain also in your death a light and life."²⁷

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(The reader is directed to Luther's sermons on the Gospel lection as found in the St. Louis edition: XI, 570ff.; XII, 1322ff.; XIII, 286ff.; 1730ff.; 1738ff.)