

## Preface to the Burial Hymns

1542

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*Revised by Ulrich S. Leupold*

Several hymnals published in Wittenberg during Luther's lifetime were devoted exclusively to burial hymns. The first of these, published by Joseph Klug in Wittenberg in **1542**, contained eight Latin chants and six German chorales. Luther supplied the preface, in which he outlined the guiding principles for the reform of the burial service. Here as elsewhere he did not condemn pomp and ceremony as such. He was able to interpret proper decorum at a burial as an expression of Christian hope. But he failed to detect this hope in the requiem masses of the Roman church with its morbid preoccupation with the fate of the departed and its frantic intercession for them. Luther deplored the doleful character of traditional funerals and wanted the whole funeral rite to be an expression of confident trust.

The German text, *Dem Christlichen Leser, D. Mart. Luther*, is given in **WA 35, 478-483**; the following translation is a revision of P. Z. Strodach's translation in *PE 6, 287-292*. The editor translated the rimed biblical verses.

### *Preface to the Burial Hymns*

#### *To the Christian Reader*

Dr. Martin Luther

St. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians [I Thess. 4:13-18] not to sorrow over the dead as others who have no hope, but to comfort each other **with God's Word** as having a certain hope of life and of the resurrection of the dead.

It is little wonder if those are sad who have no hope. Nor can they be blamed for it. Since they are beyond the pale of faith in Christ, they must either cherish **this** temporal life **as** the only thing worthwhile and hate to lose it, or they must expect that

after this life they will receive eternal death and the wrath of God in hell and must fear to go there.

But we Christians, who have been redeemed from **all** *this* by the dear blood of the Son of God, should by faith **train** and accustom ourselves to despise death and to regard it as a deep, strong, and sweet sleep, to regard the coffin as nothing but paradise and the bosom of our Lord Christ, and the grave **as** nothing but a soft couch or sofa, which it really is in the sight of God; for he says, John 11 [:11], “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,” and Matthew 9 [:24], “The girl is not dead but sleeping.”

Thus, too, St. Paul in I Corinthians 15 [:42-44] bans from **his** sight every ugly aspect of death in our mortal body and brings to the fore a wholly delightful and joyous picture of life when he says: “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. . . . It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.”

Accordingly, we have removed from our churches and completely abolished the popish abominations, such as vigils, masses for the dead, processions, purgatory, and all other hocus-pocus on behalf of the dead. And we do not want our churches to be houses of wailing and places of mourning any longer, but *Koemetaria*<sup>1</sup> as the old fathers were wont to call them, i.e., dormitories and resting places.

Nor do we sing any dirges or doleful songs over our dead and at the grave, but comforting hymns of the forgiveness of sins, of rest, sleep, life, and of the resurrection of departed Christians so that our faith may be strengthened and the people be moved to true devotion.

For it is meet and right that we should conduct these funerals with proper decorum in order to honor and praise that joyous article of our faith, namely, the resurrection of the dead, and in order to defy Death, that terrible foe **who** so shamefully and in so many horrible ways goes on to devour us.

Thus the holy patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and others, conducted their burials with much splendor and left explicit directions concerning them. Later the kings of Judah made

<sup>1</sup> Hence the English word “cemetery.”

a great show and pomp over the dead with costly incense and **all** sorts of rare and precious spices, all of which was done to spite the stinking and shameful Death and to praise and confess the resurrection of the dead and thus to comfort the sad and the weak in faith.

Here also belong the traditional Christian burial rites, such **as** that the bodies are carried in state, beautifully decked, and sung over, and that tombstones adorn their graves. All this is done so that the article of the resurrection may be firmly implanted in **us**. For it is our lasting, blessed, and eternal comfort and joy against death, hell, devil, and every woe.

This is also why we have collected the fine music and songs which under the papacy were used at vigils, masses for the dead, and burials. Some fine examples of these we have printed in this booklet and we, or whoever is more gifted than we, will select more of them in the future. But we have adapted other texts to the music so that it may adorn our article of the resurrection, instead of purgatory with its torment and satisfaction which lets their dead neither sleep nor rest. The melodies and notes are precious. It would be a pity to let them perish. But the texts and words are non-Christian and absurd. **They** deserve to perish.

It is the same in other matters where they outdo us by far. They have the most beautiful services, gorgeous cathedrals, and splendid cloisters. But the preaching and teaching that goes on inside is a blasphemy and for the most part serves not God but the devil. For he is the prince and god of this world and must therefore have of everything the most elegant, precious, and beautiful.

They also possess superb gold and silver monstrances and pictures, adorned with precious stones and jewels. But inside are dead bones, as likely as not from the flaying ground. Likewise they own exquisite vestments, chasubles, palliums, copes, caps, and mitres. But who is under these or clothed in them? Lazy bellies, evil wolves, and godless swine who persecute and profane the Word of God.

And indeed, they also **possess a** lot of splendid, beautiful songs and music, especially in the cathedral and parish churches. But these are used to adorn all sorts of impure and idolatrous *texts*.

Therefore, we have unclothed these idolatrous, lifeless, and foolish texts, and divested them of their beautiful music. We have put this music on the living and holy Word of God in order to sing, praise, and honor it. We want the beautiful art of music to be properly used to serve her dear Creator and his Christians. He is thereby praised and honored and we are made better and stronger in faith when his holy Word is impressed on our hearts by sweet music. God the Father with Son and Holy Spirit grant us this, Amen.

But we do not hold that the notes need to be sung the same in all the churches. Let every church follow the music according to their own book and custom. For I myself do not like to hear the notes in a responsory or other song changed from what I was accustomed to in my youth. We are concerned with changing the text, not the music.

If the graves should be honored in other ways, it would be fine to paint or write good epitaphs or verses from Scripture on the walls above (where there are such) so that they may be seen by those who go to a funeral or to the cemetery, namely, these or the like:

He has fallen asleep with his fathers and has been gathered to his people [Gen. 25:8].

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that he will awaken me out of the earth: And I shall be clothed with my skin, and in my flesh I shall see God. Job 19 [:25-26].

I lie me down and sleep; I wake again, for the Lord sustains me. Psalm 3 [:5].

I lie down and sleep in complete peace. Psalm 4 [:8].

I shall behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness. Psalm 17 [:15].

God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, for he has accepted me. Psalm 49 [:15].

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. Psalm 116 [:15].

On this mountain the Lord will remove the covering that covers all peoples, and the veil that is spread over all nations, He will swallow up death forever. Isaiah 25 [:7-8].

Thy dead shall live and arise in the body. Awake and sing, you who lie under the earth, for thy dew is as the dew of a green field. Isaiah 26 [:19].

Go, my people, into a chamber, and shut the door behind you. Hide yourself for a little while until the wrath is past. Isaiah 26 [:20].

The righteous is taken away from the evil. And those who have walked uprightly enter into peace and rest in their chambers. Isaiah 57 [:1-2].

Thus says the Lord; Behold, I will open your graves, O my people, and cause you to come up out of them. Ezekiel 37 [:12].

Many that lie sleeping under earth will awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and contempt. Daniel 12 [:2].

I will redeem them from hell and rescue them from death. O death, I will be poison to you. O hell, I will be a plague to you. Hosea 13 [:14].

I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. Exodus 3 [:6] and Matthew 22 [:32].

This is the will of the Father who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. John 6 [:39].

No one lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. Whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died, and rose, and became alive again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living [Rom. 14:7-9].

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. I Corinthians 15 [:19].

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. I Corinthians 15 [:22].

Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O hell, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks to God, who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. I Corinthians 15 [:54-57].

Christ is my life and dying my gain. Philippians 1 [:21].

Just as we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so will God bring those who sleep in Jesus with him. **I** Thessalonians 4 [:14].

Such verses and inscriptions would more fittingly adorn a cemetery than other secular emblems, such as shields and helmets.

But if anyone should have the gift and desire to put these verses into good rimes, that would help to have them read more gladly and remembered more easily. For rime and verse make good sayings and proverbs which serve better than ordinary prose.<sup>2</sup>

*Luke 2 [:29-32]*

In peace departed I this world;  
For mine own eyes have seen the Lord  
Thy Savior, God, who was to come  
A light for all of Christendom.  
While I in this my tomb remain,  
Until my Lord returns again.

*Luke 2 [:29-32]*

With peace and **joy** in sweet repose,  
Gladly will I mine eyelids close  
And go to sleep the grave within.  
For mine eyes have the Savior seen,  
Whom thou for all of us hast given  
**To** open us the gate of heaven,  
That he should be the light divine  
Which shall upon the gentiles shine,  
And unto Israel to raise  
Glory and everlasting praise.

*John 11 [:25-26]*

Christ is the truth, he is the life,  
And resurrection he will give.  
Who trust in him will life obtain,

<sup>2</sup> The translator offers no apology for the following rimes. They are **as** irregular as Luther's own. See pp. 197-201.

Though he may in the grave have lain.  
Who lives and trusts, will never die,  
But praise him in eternity.

*Job 19 [:25-26]*

This was my comfort while I lived  
I said: he lives who has me saved.  
**He** whom I trusted in my pain,  
Will cover me again with skin  
So that I from the grave shall rise  
And live with him in paradise.  
In my flesh shall I see the Lord.  
This is confirmed by his own word.

The German hymns, "In Peace and Joy I Now Depart,"<sup>3</sup> "In One True God We All Believe,"<sup>4</sup> "Now Let Us Pray to the Holy Ghost," and "We Lay this Body in the Grave,"<sup>5</sup> may be sung alternately on returning home from the interment. In the same way one may use the Latin songs, "*iam moesta quiesce*,"<sup>6</sup> "*Si enim credimus*,"<sup>7</sup> "*Corpora Sanctorum*,"<sup>8</sup> "*In pace sumus*,"<sup>10</sup> etc.

<sup>3</sup> See pp. 247-248.

<sup>4</sup> See pp. 271-273.

<sup>5</sup> See pp. 263-264.

<sup>6</sup> "*Nun lasst uns den Leib begraben*," a burial hymn by Michael Weisse. Cf. Julian, *Dictionary of Hymnology*, p. 822.

<sup>7</sup> "Despair Not, O Heart, in Thy Sorrow," a hymn by Aurelius Prudentius (348-413). See the *Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America* (1958), No. 297.

<sup>8</sup> "If We Believe that Jesus Died and Rose Again," a responsory on I Thess. 4:14. This chant is contained in Klug's burial hymns.

<sup>9</sup> "The Bodies of the Saints Are Buried in Peace," an antiphon for Laudes for feasts of martyrs. This chant is in the *Antiphonale Romanum*.

<sup>10</sup> "We Are at Peace." The editor was unable to identify this chant.