

Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague

To the Reverend Doctor Johann Hess, pastor at Breslau, and to his fellow-servants of the gospel of Jesus Christ Martinus Luther

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Your letter, sent to us at Wittenberg, was received some time ago. You wish to know whether it is proper for a Christian to run away from a deadly plague. I should have answered long ago, but God has for some time disciplined and scourged me so severely that I have been unable to do much reading or writing. Furthermore, it occurred to me that God, our merciful Father, has endowed you so richly with wisdom and truth in Christ that you yourself should be well qualified to decide this matter or even weightier problems in his Spirit and grace without our assistance.

But now you keep on writing to me and have, so to speak, humbled yourself in requesting our view on this matter so that, as St. Paul repeatedly teaches, we may always agree with one another and be of one mind [1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:2]. Therefore we here give you our opinion as far as God grants us to understand and perceive. This we would humbly submit to your judgment and to that of all devout Christians for them to come to their own decision and conclusion, as is proper. Since the rumor of death is to be heard in these and many other parts also, we have permitted these instructions of ours to be printed because others might also want to make use of them.

To begin with, some people are of the firm opinion that one need not and should not run away from a deadly plague. Rather, since death is God's punishment, which he sends upon us for our sins, we must submit to God and with a true and firm faith patiently await our punishment. They look upon running away as an outright wrong and as lack of belief in God. Others take the position that one may properly flee, particularly if one holds no public office.

I cannot censure the former for their excellent decision. They uphold a good cause, namely, a strong faith in God, and deserve commendation because they desire every Christian to hold to a strong, firm faith. It takes more than a milk faith to await a death before which most of the saints themselves have been and

still are in dread. Who would not acclaim these earnest people to whom death is a little thing? They willingly accept God's chastisement, doing so without tempting God, as we shall hear later on.

Since it is generally true of Christians that few are strong and many are weak, one simply cannot place the same burden upon everyone. A person who has a strong faith can drink poison and suffer no harm, Mark 16[:18], while one who has a weak faith would thereby suffer death. Peter could walk upon the water because he was strong in faith. When he began to doubt and his faith weakened, he sank and almost drowned. When those who are strong travel with those who are weak, the strong must try not to walk at a pace based on their strength lest they walk their weak companions nearly to death. Christ does not want his weak ones to be abandoned, as St. Paul teaches in Rom. 15[:1] and 1 Cor. 12[:22ff.].

To put it briefly and concisely, running away from death may happen in one of two ways. First, it may happen in disobedience to God's word and command, for instance, in the case of those who are imprisoned for the sake of God's word and who, to escape death, deny and repudiate God's word. In such a situation everyone has Christ's plain mandate and command not to flee but rather to suffer death, as he says, "Whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven" and "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul," Matt. 10[:28, 33].

Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry such as preachers and pastors must likewise remain steadfast before the peril of death. We have a plain command from Christ, "A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep but the hireling sees the wolf coming and flees" [John 10:11]. For when people are dying, they most need a spiritual ministry which strengthens and comforts their consciences by word and sacrament and in faith overcomes death. However, where enough preachers are available in one locality and they agree to encourage the other clergy to leave in order not to expose themselves needlessly to danger, I do not consider such conduct sinful because spiritual services are provided and because they would have been ready and willing to stay if it had been necessary. We read that St. Athanasius fled from his church that his life might be spared because many others were there to administer his office. Similarly, the brethren in

Damascus lowered Paul in a basket over the wall to make it possible for him to escape, Acts 9[:25]. And also in Acts 19[:30] Paul allowed himself to be kept from risking danger in the marketplace because it was not essential for him to do so.

Accordingly, all those in public office such as mayors, judges, and the like are under the obligation to remain. This, too, is God's word, which institutes secular authority and commands that town and country be ruled, protected, and preserved, as St. Paul teaches in Rom. 13[:4], "The governing authorities are God's ministers for your own good." To abandon an entire community that one has been called to govern, to leave it without officials or government, exposed to all kinds of danger such as fires, murder, riots, and every imaginable disaster, is a great sin. It is the kind of disaster the devil would like to instigate wherever there is no law and order. St. Paul says, "Anyone who does not provide for family members denies the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" [1 Tim. 5:8]. On the other hand, if in great weakness they flee but provide capable substitutes to make sure that the community is well governed and protected, as we previously indicated, and if they continually and carefully supervise them [i.e., the substitutes], all that would be proper.

What applies to these two offices [church and state] should also apply to persons who stand in a relationship of service or duty toward one another. A servant should not leave his master nor a maid her mistress except with the knowledge and permission of master or mistress. Again, a master should not desert his servant nor a lady her maid unless suitable provision for their care has been made somewhere. In all these matters it is a divine command that servants and maids should render obedience and by the same token masters and ladies should take care of their servants. Likewise, fathers and mothers are bound by God's law to serve and help their children, and children their fathers and mothers. Likewise, paid public servants such as city physicians, city clerks, and constables, or whatever their titles, should not flee unless they furnish capable substitutes who are acceptable to their employer.

In the case of children who are orphaned, guardians or close friends are under obligation either to stay with them or to arrange diligently for other nursing care for their sick friends. Yes, no one should dare leave a neighbor unless there are

others who will take care of the sick in their stead and nurse them. In such cases we must respect the word of Christ, “I was sick and you did not visit me ... [Matt. 25:41–46]. According to this passage we are bound to each other in such a way that we not forsake others in distress. Instead, we are obliged to assist and help them, as we ourselves would like to be helped.

Where no such emergency exists and enough people are available for the care of the sick—whether voluntarily, by duty, or arranged by those who are weak in faith—so that there is no need for additional helpers, or where the sick do not want them and have refused their services, I judge that they are free either to flee or to remain. If they are sufficiently bold and strong in their faith, let them stay in God’s name; that is certainly no sin. If they are weak and fearful, let them flee in God’s name as long as they do not neglect their duty toward their neighbors but have made adequate provision for others to provide care. To flee from death and to save one’s life is a natural tendency, implanted by God and not forbidden unless it be against God and neighbor, as St. Paul says in Eph. 4 [5:29], “No one ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it.” It is even commanded that everyone should as much as possible preserve body and life and not neglect them, as St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 12[:21–26] that God has so ordered the members of the body that each one cares and works for the other.

It is not forbidden but rather commanded that by the sweat of our brow we should seek our daily food, clothing, and all we need, and that we should avoid destruction and disaster whenever we can, as long as we do so without detracting from our love and duty toward our neighbor. How much more appropriate it is therefore to seek to preserve life and avoid death if this can be done without harm to our neighbor, inasmuch as life is more than food and clothing, as Christ himself says in Matt. 5 [6:25]. If you are so strong in faith, however, that you can willingly suffer nakedness, hunger, and want without tempting God and without trying to escape, although you could do so, you may continue that way; but do not condemn those who will not or cannot do the same.

Examples in Holy Scripture abundantly prove that to flee from death is not wrong in itself. Abraham was a great saint but he feared death and escaped it by pretending that his wife, Sarah, was his sister. Because he did so without

neglecting or adversely affecting his neighbor, it was not counted as a sin against him. His son Isaac did likewise, Jacob also fled from his brother Esau to avoid death at his hands. Likewise, David fled from Saul, and from Absalom. The prophet Uriah escaped from King Jehoiakim and fled into Egypt.^t The valiant prophet Elijah, 1 Kgs. 19 [:3], had destroyed all the prophets of Baal by his great faith, but afterward, when Queen Jezebel threatened him, he became afraid and fled into the desert. Before that, Moses fled into the land of Midian when the king searched for him in Egypt. Many others have done likewise. All of them fled from death when it was possible and saved their lives, yet without depriving their neighbors of anything, but first meeting their obligations toward them. Moses flees Egypt (Exod. 2:15)

Yes, you may reply, but these examples do not refer to dying by pestilence but to death under persecution. Answer: Death is death, no matter how it occurs. According to Holy Scripture God sent his four scourges: pestilence, famine, sword, and wild beasts. If it is permissible to flee from one or the other in clear conscience, why not from all four? Our examples demonstrate how the holy fathers escaped from the sword; it is quite evident that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob fled from the other scourge, namely, hunger and death, when they went to Egypt to escape famine, as we are told in Genesis [40–47]. Likewise, why should one not run away from wild beasts? I hear people say, “If war or the Turks come, we should not flee from our village or town but stay and await God’s punishment by the sword.” That is quite true; let those who have a strong faith wait for their death, but they should not condemn those who take flight.

By such reasoning, when a house is on fire, no one should run outside or rush to help because such a fire is also a punishment from God. Those who fall into deep water dare not save themselves by swimming but instead must surrender to the water as to a divine punishment. Very well, do so if you can but do not tempt God, and allow others to do as much as they are capable of doing. Likewise, if someone breaks a leg, is wounded or bitten, he should not seek medical aid but say, “It is God’s punishment. I shall bear it until it heals by itself.” Freezing weather and winter are also God’s punishment and can cause death. Why run to get inside or near a fire? Be strong and stay outside until it becomes warm again. We should then need no apothecaries or drugs or physicians because all illnesses

are punishment from God. Hunger and thirst are also great punishments and torture. Why do you eat and drink instead of letting yourself be punished until hunger and thirst stop of themselves? Ultimately such talk will lead to the point where we abbreviate the Lord's Prayer and no longer pray, "deliver us from evil, Amen," since we would have to stop praying to be saved from hell and stop seeking to escape it. It, too, is God's punishment as is every kind of evil. Where would all this end?

From what has been said we derive this guidance: We must pray against every form of evil and guard against it to the best of our ability in order not to act contrary to God, as was previously explained. If it be God's will that evil come upon us and destroy us, none of our precautions will help us. We must all take this to heart: first of all, if we feel bound to remain where death rages in order to serve our neighbor, let us commend ourselves to God and say, "Lord, I am in your hands; you have kept me here; your will be done. I am your lowly creature. You can kill me or preserve me in this pestilence in the same way as if I were in fire, water, drought, or any other danger." If we are free, however, and can escape, let us commend ourselves and say, "Lord God, I am weak and fearful. Therefore I am running away from evil and am doing what I can to protect myself against it. I am nevertheless in your hands in this danger as in any other which might overtake me. Your will be done. My flight alone will not succeed of itself because calamity and harm are everywhere. Moreover, the devil never sleeps. He is a murderer from the beginning [John 8:44] and tries everywhere to instigate murder and misfortune."

In the same way we must accord our neighbors the same treatment in other troubles and perils also, and we owe it to our neighbors to do so. If our neighbors' house is on fire, love compels me to run to help them extinguish the flames. If there are enough other people around to put the fire out, I may either go home or remain to help. If someone falls into the water or into a pit I dare not turn away but must hurry to help the person as best I can. If there are others to do it, I am released from this responsibility. If I see that someone is hungry or thirsty, I cannot ignore that person but must offer food and drink, not considering whether I would risk impoverishing myself by doing so. Those who will not help or support others unless they can do so without affecting their safety or property will never

help their neighbor. They will always reckon with the possibility that doing so will bring some disadvantage and damage, danger and loss. No neighbor can live alongside another without risk to one's own safety, property, wife, or child. We must run the risk that fire or some other accident will start in our neighbor's house and destroy us bodily or deprive us of our goods, spouse, children, and all we have.

Those who do not do that for their neighbors, but instead forsake them and leave them to their misfortune, become murderers in the sight of God, as St. John states in his epistles, "All who hate a brother or sister are murderers," and again, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" [1 John 3:15, 17, NRSV]. That is also one of the sins which God attributed to the city of Sodom when he speaks through the prophet Ezekiel [16:49], "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." Christ, therefore, will condemn them as murderers on the Last Day when he will say, "I was sick and you did not visit me" [Matt. 25:43]. If that shall be the judgment upon those who have failed to visit the sick and needy or to offer them relief, what will become of those who abandoned them and let them lie there like dogs and pigs? Yes, how will they fare who rob the poor of the little they have and plague them in all kinds of ways? That is what the tyrants do to the poor who accept the gospel. But let that be; they have their condemnation.

It would be well, where there is an efficient government in cities and states, to maintain municipal homes and hospitals staffed with people to take care of the sick so that patients from private homes can be sent there—as was the intent and purpose of our forefathers with so many pious bequests, hospices, hospitals, and infirmaries—so that it should not be necessary for every citizen to maintain a hospital in each home. That would indeed be a fine, commendable, and Christian arrangement to which everyone should offer generous help and contributions, particularly the government. Where there are no such institutions—and they exist in only a few places—we must give hospital care and be nurses for one another in any extremity or risk the loss of salvation and the grace of God. Thus it is written

in God's word and command, "Love your neighbor as yourself," and in Matt. 7[:12], "So whatever you wish that [others] would do to you, do so to them."

Now if a deadly epidemic strikes, we should stay where we are, make our preparations, and take courage in the fact that we are mutually bound together (as previously indicated) so that we cannot desert one another or flee from one another. First, we can be sure that God's punishment has come upon us, not only to chastise us for our sins but also to test our faith and love—our faith in that we may see and experience how we should act toward God; our love in that we may recognize how we should act toward our neighbor. I am of the opinion that all the epidemics, like any plague, are spread among the people by evil spirits who poison the air or exhale a pestilential breath, which puts a deadly poison into the flesh. Nevertheless, this is God's decree and punishment to which we must patiently submit and serve our neighbor, risking our lives in this manner as St. John teaches, "If Christ laid down his life for us, we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters" [1 John 3:16, NRSV].

When anyone is overcome by horror and repugnance in the presence of a sick person we should take courage and strength in the firm assurance that it is the devil who stirs up such abhorrence, fear, and loathing in our hearts. He is such a bitter, knavish devil that he not only unceasingly tries to slay and kill us, but also takes delight in making us deathly afraid, worried, and apprehensive so that we should regard dying as horrible and have no rest or peace all through our life. And so the devil would excrete us out of this life as he tries to make us despair of God and become unwilling and unprepared to die. Then, under the stormy and dark sky of fear and anxiety, he makes us forget and lose Christ, our light and life, and desert our neighbors in their troubles. We would sin thereby against God and humanity; that would be the devil's glory and delight. Because we know that the devil's game is to induce such fear and dread, we should instead minimize it, take courage just to spite and annoy him, and send those terrors right back to him. And we should arm ourselves with this answer to the devil: "Get away, you devil, with your terrors!

Just because you hate it, I'll spite you by going the more quickly to help my sick neighbor. I'll pay no attention to you. I've got two heavy blows to use against you:

the first one is that I know that helping my neighbor is a deed well-pleasing to God and all the angels; by this deed I do God's will and render true service and obedience to him. Especially if you hate it so and are so strongly opposed to it, it must be particularly acceptable to God. I'd do this readily and gladly if I could please only one angel who might look with delight on it. But now that it pleases my Lord Jesus Christ and the whole heavenly host because it is the will and command of God, my Father, then how could any fear of you cause me to spoil such joy in heaven or such delight for my Lord? Or how could I, by flattering you, give you and your devils in hell reason to mock and laugh at me? No, you'll not have the last word! If Christ shed his blood for me and died for me, why should I not expose myself to some small dangers for his sake and disregard this feeble plague? If you can terrorize, Christ can strengthen me. If you can kill, Christ can give life. If you have poison in your fangs, Christ has far greater medicine. Should not my dear Christ, with his precepts, his kindness, and all his encouragement, be more important in my spirit than you, roguish devil, with your false terrors in my weak flesh? God forbid! Get away, devil. Here is Christ and here am I, his servant in this work. Let Christ prevail! Amen."

The second blow against the devil is God's mighty promise by which he encourages those who minister to the needy. He says in Ps. 41[:1–3], "Blessed are those who consider the poor. The LORD will deliver them in the day of trouble. The LORD will protect them and keep them alive; the LORD will bless them on earth and not give them up to the will of their enemies. The LORD will sustain them on their sickbed. In their illness he will heal all their infirmities." Are not these glorious and mighty promises of God heaped up upon those who minister to the needy? What should terrorize us or frighten us away from such great and divine comfort? The service we can render to the needy is indeed such a small thing in comparison with God's promises and rewards that St. Paul says to Timothy, "Godliness is of value in every way, and it holds promise both for the present life and for the life to come" [1 Tim. 4:8]. Godliness is nothing else but service to God. Service to God is indeed service to our neighbor. It is proved by experience that those who nurse the sick with love, devotion, and sincerity are generally protected. Though they are poisoned, they are not harmed. As the psalm says, "in his illness you heal all his infirmities" [Ps. 41:3], that is, you change his bed of sickness into a bed of health. A person who attends a patient because

of greed, or with the expectation of an inheritance or some personal advantage in such services, should not be surprised if eventually he is infected, disfigured, or even dies before he comes into possession of that estate or inheritance.

But those who serve the sick for the sake of God's gracious promise (though they may accept a suitable payment, to which they are entitled inasmuch as every laborer deserves a wage) will have the great assurance that they shall also be cared for. God himself shall be their attendant and their physician, too. What an attendant he is! What a physician! Friend, what are all the physicians, apothecaries, and attendants in comparison to God? Should that not encourage us to go and serve the sick, even though they might have as many contagious boils on them as they have hairs on their bodies, and though we might be bent double carrying a hundred plague-ridden bodies! What do all kinds of pestilence or devils mean over against God, who binds and obliges himself to be our attendant and physician? Shame and more shame on you, you out-and-out unbeliever, for despising such great comfort and letting yourself become more frightened by some small boil or some uncertain danger than emboldened by such sure and faithful promises of God! What would it avail you if all physicians and the entire world were at your service, but God were not present? Again, what harm could overtake you if the whole world were to desert you and no physician would remain with you, but God would abide with you with his assurance? Do you not know that you are surrounded as by thousands of angels who watch over you so that you can indeed trample upon the plague, as it is written in Ps. 91[:11–13], "He has given his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up lest you dash your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion and the adder, and trample the young lion and the serpent under foot."

Therefore, dear friends, let us not become so desperate as to desert our own whom we are duty-bound to help, and to flee in such a cowardly way in terror of the devil, or to allow him the joy of mocking us and vexing and distressing God and all his angels. For it is certainly true that those who despise such great promises and commands of God and leave their own people destitute violate all of God's laws and are guilty of the murder of the neighbors whom they abandon. I fear that in such a case God's promise will be reversed and changed into horrible

threats and the psalm [41] will then read this way against them: “Accursed are those who do not provide for the needy but escape and forsake them. The LORD in turn will not spare them in evil days but will flee from them and desert them. The LORD will not preserve them and keep them alive and will not prosper them on earth but will deliver them into the hands of their enemies. The LORD will not refresh them on their sickbed nor take them from the bed of their illness.” For “the measure you give will be the measure you get” [Matt. 7:2]. Nothing else can come of it. It is terrible to hear this, more terrible to be waiting for this to happen, most terrible to experience it. What else can happen if God withdraws his hand and forsakes us except sheer devilment and every kind of evil? It cannot be otherwise if, against God’s command, we abandon our neighbor. This fate will surely overtake everyone of this sort, unless they sincerely repent.

This I well know, that if it were Christ or his mother who was laid low by illness, everybody would be so solicitous and would gladly become a servant or helper. Everyone would want to be bold and fearless; nobody would flee but everyone would come running. And yet they don’t hear what Christ himself says, “As you did it to one of the least, you did it to me” [Matt. 25:40]. When he speaks of the greatest commandment he says, “The second commandment is like [the first commandment], you shall love your neighbor as yourself” [Matt. 22:39]. There you hear that the command to love your neighbor is equal to the greatest commandment to love God, and that what you do or fail to do for your neighbor means doing the same to God. If you wish to serve Christ and to wait on him, very well, you have your sick neighbor close at hand. Go to them and serve them, and you will surely find Christ in them, not outwardly but in his word. If you do not wish or care to serve your neighbor, you can be sure that, if Christ lay there instead, you would not serve him either. You would let him just lie there. It is nothing but an illusion on your part that puffs you up with vain pride, namely, that you would really serve Christ if he were there in person. That is nothing but lies. Those who want to serve Christ in person would surely serve their neighbor as well. This is said as an admonition and encouragement against fear and a disgraceful flight, to which the devil would tempt us, so that we would disregard God’s command in our dealings with our neighbor and thus fall into sin on the left hand.

Others sin on the right hand. They are much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but instead lightheartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are. They say that it is God's punishment; if he wants to protect them he can do so without medicines or our carefulness. This is not trusting God, but rather tempting him. God has created medicines and provided us with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body so that we can live in good health.

If they make no use of intelligence or medicine when they could do so without detriment to their neighbors, such people injure their bodies and must beware lest they become a suicide in God's eyes. By the same reasoning they might forgo eating and drinking, clothing and shelter, and boldly proclaim their faith that if God wanted to preserve them from starvation and cold, he could do so without food and clothing. Actually that would be suicide. It is even more shameful for them to pay no heed to their own bodies and to fail to protect them against the plague the best they are able, and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive if they had taken care of their bodies as they should have. They are thus responsible before God for their neighbor's death and are a murderer many times over. Indeed, such people behave as though a house were burning in the city and nobody was trying to put the fire out. Instead they give leeway to the flames so that the whole city is consumed, saying that if God so willed, he could save the city without water to quench the fire.

No, my dear friends, that is no good. Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence or has recovered, and act like someone who wants to help put out the burning city. What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body? You ought to think this way: "Very well, by God's decree the enemy has sent us poison and deadly refuse. Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their

death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me, and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, as stated above. See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.

Moreover, those who have contracted the disease and recovered should keep away from others and not admit others into their presence unless it is necessary. Though they should receive aid in their time of need, as previously pointed out, after their recovery, they should act toward others so that no one becomes unnecessarily endangered on their account and thus they cause another's death. "Whoever loves danger," says the wise man, "will perish by it" [Eccles. 3:26]. If the people in a city were to show themselves bold in their faith when a neighbor's need so demands, and cautious when no emergency exists, and if everyone would help ward off contagion as best they can, then the death toll would indeed be moderate. But if some are too panicky and desert their neighbors in their plight, and if some are so foolish as not to take precautions but aggravate the contagion, then the devil has a heyday and many will die. On both counts this is a grievous offense to God and to humanity—here it is tempting God; there it is bringing humanity into despair. Then the one who flees, the devil will pursue; the one who stays behind, the devil will hold captive so that no one escapes.

Some are even worse than that. They keep it secret that they have the disease and go among others in the belief that by contaminating and poisoning others they can rid themselves of the plague and so recover. With this idea they enter streets and homes, trying to saddle children or servants with the disease and thus save themselves. I certainly believe that this is the devil's doing, who helps turn the wheel of fate to make this happen. I have been told that some are so incredibly vicious that they circulate among people and enter homes because they are sorry that the plague has not reached that far and wish to carry it in, as though it were a prank, like putting lice into fur garments or flies into someone's living room. I do not know whether I should believe this; if it is true, I do not know whether we Germans are not really devils instead of human beings. It must be

admitted that there are some extremely coarse and wicked people. The devil is never idle.

My advice is that if any such persons are discovered, the judge should take them by the ear and turn them over to Master Jack, the hangman, as outright and deliberate murderers. What else are such people but assassins in our town? Here and there an assassin will jab a knife through someone and no one can find the culprit. So these folk infect a child here, a woman there, and can never be caught. They go on laughing as though they had accomplished something. Where this is the case, it would be better to live among wild beasts than with such murderers. I do not know how to preach to such killers. They pay no heed. I appeal to the authorities to take charge and turn them over to the help and advice not of physicians, but of Master Jack, the hangman.

If in the Old Testament God himself ordered lepers to be banished from the community and compelled to live outside the city to prevent contamination [Leviticus 13–14], we must do the same with this dangerous pestilence so that those who become infected will stay away from other people, or allow themselves to be taken away and given speedy help with medicine. Under such circumstances it is our duty to assist those who are infected and not forsake them in their plight, as I have repeatedly pointed out before. Then the poison is stopped in time, which benefits not only the individual infected but also the whole community, which might be contaminated if one person is permitted to infect others. Our plague here in Wittenberg has been caused by nothing but filth. The air, thank God, is still clean and pure, but some few have been contaminated because of the laziness or recklessness of some. So the devil enjoys himself at the terror and flight which he causes among us. May God thwart him! Amen. This is what we think and conclude on this subject of fleeing from death by the plague. If you are of a different opinion, may God enlighten you. Amen.

Because this letter will go out in print for people to read, I regard it useful to add some brief instructions on how one should care and provide for the soul in the time of death. We have done this orally from the pulpit, and still do so every day in fulfillment of the ministry to which we have been called as pastors. First, one must admonish the people to attend church and listen to the sermon so that they

learn through God's word how to live and how to die. It must be noted that those who are so uncouth and wicked as to despise God's word while they are in good health should be left unattended when they are sick unless they demonstrate their remorse and repentance with great earnestness, tears, and lamentation. Those who want to live like a heathen or a dog and do not publicly repent should not expect us to administer the sacrament to them or have us count them a Christian. Let them die as they have lived because we shall not throw pearls before swine nor give to dogs what is holy [Matt. 7:6]. Sad to say, there are many churlish, hardened ruffians who do not care for their souls when they live or when they die. They simply lie down and die like unthinking hulks.

Second, everyone should prepare in time and get ready for death by going to confession and taking the sacrament once every week or fortnight. They should become reconciled with their neighbor and make their will so that, if the Lord knocks and they depart before a pastor or chaplain can arrive, they have provided for their souls, have left nothing undone, and have committed themselves to God. When many are dying and only two or three pastors are on duty, it is impossible to visit everyone, to give instruction, and to teach each one what a Christian ought to know in the anguish of death. Those who have been careless and negligent in these matters must account for themselves. That is their own fault. After all, we cannot set up a private pulpit and altar daily at their bedsides simply because they have despised the public pulpit and altar to which God has summoned and called them.

Third, if someone wants the chaplain or pastor to come, let the sick send word in time to call him and do so early on, before the illness overwhelms the patient and neither senses nor reason remain. The reason I say this is that some are so negligent that they make no request and send no message until the soul is perched for flight on the tip of the tongue and they are no longer rational or able to speak. Then we are told, "Dear Sir, say the very best you can to him," etc. But earlier, when the illness first began, they wanted no visit from the pastor, but instead would say, "Oh, there's no need. I hope he'll get better." What should a diligent pastor do with such people who neglect both body and soul? They live and die like beasts in the field. They want us to teach them the gospel at the last minute and administer the sacrament to them as they were accustomed to it

under the papacy when nobody asked whether they believed or understood the gospel but just stuffed the sacrament down their throats as if into a bread bag.

This won't do. If they cannot talk or indicate by a sign that they believe, understand, and desire the sacrament—particularly if they have willfully neglected it—we will not give it to them just anytime they ask for it. We have been commanded not to offer the holy sacrament to unbelievers but rather to believers who can state and confess their faith. Let the others alone in their unbelief; we are guiltless because we have not been slothful in preaching, teaching, exhortation, consolation, visitation, or in anything else that pertains to our ministry and office. This, in brief, is our instruction and what we practice here. We do not write this for you in Breslau, because Christ is with you and without our aid he will amply instruct you and supply your needs with his own ointment. To him be praise and honor together with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, world without end. Amen.

Because we have come upon the subject of death, I cannot refrain from saying something about burials. First of all, I leave it to the doctors of medicine and others with greater experience than mine in such matters to decide whether it is dangerous to maintain cemeteries within the city limits. I do not know and do not claim to understand whether vapors and mists arise out of graves to pollute the air. If this were so my previously stated warnings constitute ample reason to locate cemeteries outside the city. As we have learned, all of us have the responsibility of warding off this poison to the best of our ability because God has commanded us to care for the body, to protect and nurse it so that we are not exposed needlessly. In an emergency, however, we must be bold enough to risk our health if that is necessary. Thus we should be ready for both—to live and to die according to God's will. For "none of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself," as St. Paul says, Rom. 15 [14:7].

It is very well known that the custom in antiquity, both among Jews and pagans, among saints and sinners, was to bury the dead outside the city. Those people were just as prudent as we claim to be ourselves. This is also evident in St. Luke's Gospel, when Christ raised from the dead the widow's son at the gates of Nain (for the text [Luke 7:12] states, "He was being carried out of the city to the grave

and a large crowd from the city was with her"). In that country it was the practice to bury the dead outside the town.

Christ's tomb, also, was prepared outside the city. Abraham, too, bought a burial plot in the field of Ephron near the double cave where all the patriarchs wished to be buried. The Latin therefore employs the term *efferi*, that is, "to carry out," by which we mean "carry to the grave." They not only carried the dead out but also burned their bodies to powder to keep the air as pure as possible.

My advice, therefore, is to follow these examples and to bury the dead outside the town. Not only necessity but piety and decency should induce us to provide a public burial ground outside the town, that is, our town of Wittenberg.

A cemetery rightfully ought to be a fine quiet place, removed from all other localities, to which one can go and reverently meditate upon death, the Last Judgment, the resurrection, and say one's prayers. Such a place should properly be a decent, hallowed place, to be entered with trepidation and reverence because doubtlessly some saints rest there. It might even be arranged to have religious pictures and portraits painted on the walls.

But our cemetery, what is it like? Four or five alleys, two or three marketplaces, with the result that no place in the whole town is busier or noisier than the cemetery. People and cattle roam over it at any time, night and day. Each house has a door or pathway to it and all sorts of things take place there, probably even some that are not fit to be mentioned. This totally destroys respect and reverence for the graves, and people think no more about walking across it than if it were a burial ground for executed criminals. Not even the Turk would dishonor the place the way we do. And yet a cemetery should inspire us to devout thoughts, to the contemplation of death and the resurrection, and to respect for the saints who rest there. How can that be done at such a common place through which everyone must walk and into which everyone's door opens? If a cemetery is to have some dignity, I would rather be put to rest in the Elbe or in the forest. If a graveyard were located at a quiet, remote spot where no one could make a path through it, it would be a spiritual, proper, and holy sight and could be so arranged that it would inspire devotion in those who go there. That would be my advice.

Follow it, who so wishes. If anyone knows better, let him go ahead. I am no man's master.

In closing, we admonish and plead with you in Christ's name to help us with your prayers to God so that we may do battle with word and precept against the real and spiritual pestilence of Satan in his wickedness with which he now poisons and defiles the world—that is, particularly against those who blaspheme the sacrament, though there are other sectarians also. Satan is infuriated and perhaps he feels that the day of Christ is at hand. That is why he raves so fiercely and tries to rob us of the Savior, Jesus Christ. Under the papacy Satan was simply "flesh" so that even a monk's cap had to be regarded as sacred. Now he is nothing more than sheer "spirit," and Christ's flesh and word are no longer supposed to mean anything. They made an answer to my treatise long ago, but I am surprised that it has not yet reached me at Wittenberg. [When it does] I shall, God willing, answer them once again and let the matter drop. I can see that they will only become worse. They are like a bedbug which itself has a foul smell, but the harder you rub to crush it, the more it stinks. I hope that I've written enough in this pamphlet for those who can be saved so that—God be praised—many may thereby be snatched from their jaws and many more may be strengthened and confirmed in the truth. May Christ our Lord and Savior preserve us all in pure faith and fervent love, unspotted and pure until his day. Amen. Pray for me, a poor sinner.

Haemig, Mary Jane. *The Annotated Luther: Pastoral Writings (The Annotated Luther Series Book 4)* (p. 54-74). Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.