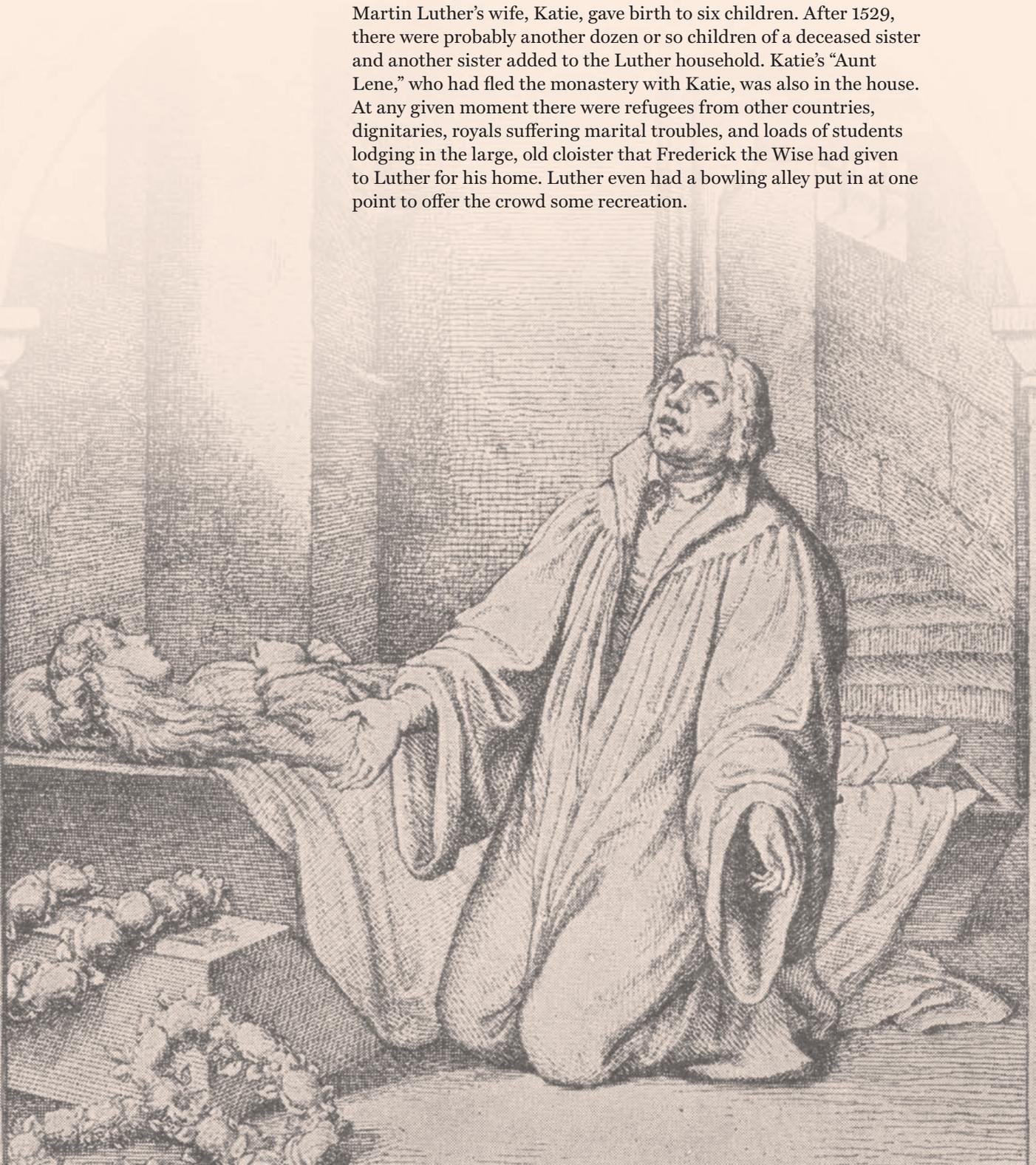


Grieving with Hope

Martin Luther's wife, Katie, gave birth to six children. After 1529, there were probably another dozen or so children of a deceased sister and another sister added to the Luther household. Katie's "Aunt Lene," who had fled the monastery with Katie, was also in the house. At any given moment there were refugees from other countries, dignitaries, royals suffering marital troubles, and loads of students lodging in the large, old cloister that Frederick the Wise had given to Luther for his home. Luther even had a bowling alley put in at one point to offer the crowd some recreation.



Amazingly, we just don't find Luther complaining about this plethora of people. He enjoyed it. Katie managed the whole thing. But for this article, it is noteworthy that in Luther's day, with limited medical treatment and catastrophic diseases like the plague, death was a frequent reality.

Katie gave birth to a second child, Elizabeth, on Dec. 10, 1527 — during an outbreak of the plague in Wittenberg. The poor child died the following August. Luther was devastated. “My baby daughter, little Elizabeth, has passed away. It is amazing what a sick heart ... she has left to me, so much has grief for her overcome me. Never before would I have believed that a father's heart could have such tender feelings for his child. Do pray to the Lord for me” (*Luther's Works* 49:203).

Luther's pain was even worse when he lost his teenage daughter, Magdalena, in September 1542. “When his daughter was in the agony of death, he fell on his knees before the bed and, weeping bitterly, prayed that God might will to save her. Thus she gave up the ghost in the arms of her father. Her mother was in the same room, but farther from the bed on account of her grief. It was after the ninth hour on the Wednesday after the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity in the year 1542” (*Luther's Works* 54:431).

Several references tell of Luther's great struggle — the struggle we all face in times of death. With the recent death of my own brother, my family is facing it now. We know the certainty of eternal life in Christ, freely given, and we have the sure hope of the resurrection of the body. Yet the pain of loss — a very real and visceral pain, particularly for my parents — is, frankly, overwhelming at times. “I believe; help my unbelief!” (*MARK* 9:24).

“When [Magdalena] died, Luther said, ‘I am joyful in spirit but I am sad according to the flesh. The flesh doesn't take kindly to this. The separation troubles me above measure. It's strange to know that she is surely at peace and that she is well off there, very well off, and yet to grieve so much!’ As the coffin was taken from the home, Luther commented, ‘I've just sent a saint to heaven — yes, a living saint. Would that our death

might be like this!’ Again, turning to others, Luther said, ‘Do not be sorrowful. I have sent a saint to heaven. In fact, I have now sent two of them’” (*Luther's Works* 54:432–33).

I've been around a great deal of death as a pastor. I always try to stay at the death watch in homes or hospitals. In every circumstance, it's always difficult. Watching my own dear brother pass from time to eternity, not two weeks ago, was exponentially more difficult, and remains so. He died in Christ. I believe in Christ and the truth of His promises. “I go to prepare a place for you ...” (*JOHN* 14:2). Then why is this so painful?

“Jesus wept” (*JOHN* 11:35). That's the shortest verse in the Bible. And it's odd. Jesus already knew that He would raise Lazarus. He knew the joy that would soon overcome Mary and Martha and the family. Yet He, the Son of God, grieved the horror of death. Because Jesus grieved the loss of the precious life of His friend, we know that grieving is not, in and of itself, sinful. To be sure, our grieving (along with doubt, fear and anger) is shot through with sin, because each of us is shot through with sin! But

still, with repentant hearts as Christians, death invites us to grieve the loss of a precious person — a gift to us, a life, which has meant so much. What a blessing to know Jesus. My brother told me in his last days, “I'm not afraid to die.”

Like Luther then — like all of us eventually — my family and I are in deep grief now. My brother's life on this earth has closed and will not be opened to us again until eternity. But note what Paul says. Now we grieve, and it's good that we do. But Paul distinguishes between those who grieve and those grieving who “have no hope”: “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (*1 THESS.* 4:13–14). **LW**

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