

# HOPE

that gives

# LIFE



by Betsy Karkan

“BUT THE SERPENT SAID TO THE WOMAN,  
‘YOU WILL NOT SURELY DIE’”  
(GEN. 3:4).

All lies about death started with this simple statement. It is not just the first lie among generations of lies about death; it is also every lie about life, because at its core, it says that God, who is Life, is a liar. This is nothing less than unbelief, which leads to death.

Faith, on the other hand, agrees with the Word of God and rejects the lies of Satan. In his Genesis commentary, Martin Luther describes the temptation of Eve. He says that it was one thing to “turn away from God and His Word and lend her ears to Satan. But far more serious ... Eve agrees with Satan when he charges God with lying.” Rather than having faith that gives life, Eve chose unbelief that resulted in death.

Since the Fall, lies about what the Word of God says concerning death and life have spread and manifested themselves in various ways. During the Reformation, Martin Luther worked to combat many of these lies that existed in both society and the Church.

### Approaching death

Luther set about reforming the way the Church viewed death and the spiritual care of the dying. At the time, the world was all too familiar with death. The plague was a not-so-distant memory,

the Word of God was twisted, and people were led to believe the lies of Satan — those of doubt and unbelief — rather than the promises of forgiveness in Christ. Luther wrote extensively on the topic, gradually developed new liturgies and worked to change these false practices, presenting a biblical view of death and how to die well. It included exhorting Christians to hope in Christ, encouraging them to see God as a gracious and loving Father and pointing to the Sacraments as assurance of God’s favor toward them.

### The Christian as victor

In his well-known sermon called “On Preparing to Die,” Luther writes: “Christ is nothing other than sheer life” and “Seek yourself only in Christ and not in yourself and you will find yourself in him eternally.” In his lectures on Genesis, he encourages the believer to faith, saying, “By faith the Christian is made the victor over sin, over the Law, and over death, so that not even the gates of hell can prevail against him.” Luther points the dying Christian to Christ, who is Life, assuring them that in Him they rest secure.

Christians still today live in a culture that both fears and propagates death, spreading lies just as Satan did in the Garden of Eden. Like Eve, many

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wars were frequent and disease spread easily. Christians lived perpetually in what Luther referred to as a “vale of tears” and longed to be with God in heaven.

By the 14th century, the medieval church had established a practice known as the *ars moriendi* or “the art of dying.” These were a set of instructions for how to help a dying person prepare for and have a good death. Unfortunately, by Luther’s time, these procedures included doing various good works in order to be justified and earn a way into heaven rather than depending on Christ and His atoning sacrifice for them, praying to the saints or the Virgin Mary to intercede for someone — rather than to Christ Himself — and purchasing indulgences that might reduce a person’s time in purgatory, essentially buying one’s way into heaven.

Perhaps the biggest harm caused by these teachings was that most Christians approached death with fear and uncertainty. Once again,

choose to agree with Satan rather than believe the Word of God concerning life and death. Yet, thanks be to God, even in death and unbelief He gave Eve — and He gives us — His life and the promise of eternal life. The promise that the serpent’s head would be crushed and death would be destroyed gave them hope. That Christ has fulfilled this promise on the cross gives us the same. “Thus Adam was also revived by this address of the Lord, not perfectly indeed, for the life which he lost he did not yet recover,” Luther reminds us, “but he got the hope of that life when he heard that Satan’s tyranny was to be crushed.” **LW**



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