

PART 3 – DON’T WASTE YOUR ISOLATION

Good Morning Brothers & Sisters!

On Sunday I mentioned a letter written by Martin Luther in 1527 which we know by the title "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague." It was written by Luther in response to a question from a group of clergy in Breslau concerning whether or not a Christian could flee their homes and/or jobs in light of the dangers posed by the plague. These pastors asked Johann Hess (1490-1547) to ask for Luther's wisdom on their behalf.

The Bubonic Plague, also known as Black Death, was carried by fleas and spread through French and Italian shipping trades. It devastated Europe beginning in the mid 14th century and it continued in cycles of various lengths until the 17th century. The first epidemic (1357-1551) claimed the lives of one-third of Europe's population.

It could attack the body through various means (lymph nodes, bloodstream, lungs) and carried high mortality rates. If one's lungs were infected, the mortality rate nearly 100% and it was highly contagious.

Luther began his response to Hess and the pastors in late July of 1527, but he was interrupted at least twice as he wrote because the paper he used and his handwriting both changed at two points in the letter. He finished it in October or November of 1527. While Luther wrote, the plague arrived in his town of Wittenberg on August 2nd.

Luther practiced what he preached as his family admitted several people with the plague into lodging in their home. His son, Hans, contracted the plague but survived, and his wife was pregnant with Elizabeth during this time, who was born December 10, but died 8 months later, most likely from complications from her mother being exposed to the plague during her pregnancy. Luther himself suffered several spiritual and physical trials through this time as well.

I'll quote two well-known passages from the letter, but I'll also link you to the letter itself so you can see it. Luther discusses other things in the letter, such as pastors' responsibilities, how to love one's neighbor in such circumstances, how to fight the devil when tempted, providing hospitals, preparing for death, cemeteries, and responds to those who acted "too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague" by, among other things, "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." Relevant to today? I think so!

It is my hope that this little historical perspective will connect your situation with saints from the past as you get a small sense of how they dealt with even a worse situation.

Find the letter in its entirety here: [Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague](#)

Two quotes, both taken from *The Annotated Luther, Vol. 4: Pastoral Writings*, Mary Jane Haemig, vol. ed., Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2016.

Luther's conclusion concerning who must stay and who may flee (p. 396-7):

"From what has been said (i.e. previously in this section of the letter) 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 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 response to those who "tempt God" (p. 403-4):

"No, my dear friend, 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. 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."
