

Fall 2017 Luther Lecture 8  
Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church  
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### Luther's Eschatology

As is the case with other theological doctrines, Luther never wrote a systematic treatise on the subject of eschatology. In order to gain an understanding of his thoughts on this subject, it is necessary to look at a variety of sources. In fact, some of his letters to grieving and suffering people are a good source of his understanding in this area of theology.

Eschatology deals with both resurrection and final judgment, and also with the fate of creation itself. The question is, "What is the purpose and goal of our lives and of history itself? What is our destiny, and what is the destiny of creation itself?"

In many ways, Luther's answers to these questions are based on Christian tradition as embodied in the scriptures and the creeds of the church. As we confess every Sunday, he believed that at the end of time, all people would rise from the dead and come into the presence of God. God's presence itself would determine our final destiny. Those who accepted God's salvation in Christ would joyfully enter into an eternal fellowship with God. This is what "heaven" means. It is not a geographical place we can point to now. It is fellowship with the eternal God in whom we have the fullness of life and joy.

On the other hand, those who rejected God in life will be unable to have their maker and redeemer. They will be condemned to live in God's presence without being able to enter into fellowship with him. This is what God's judgment means; not that he will send us here or there but rather that we enter into the joy of fellowship with him, or remain painfully alienated from him forever.

But this is only one interpretation of what Luther believed. Others have argued that Luther's position was this: that those who loved the creation rather than the creator will be eternally obliterated with their idols. Rather than enjoying eternal life with God, the condemned will suffer an eternal death.

Yet others have argued that since there is no limit on God's power and grace, there exists the possibility of universal salvation. We are saved only by the power of God. Moreover, even the faith we have whereby we accept salvation is a gift from God. Those who did not receive this gift while living in time may receive it at the final resurrection. While Luther's doctrine of grace may suggest that this is a possibility, I know of no references in his writing that suggests he believed in universal salvation. Rather, the opposite is the case.

The Hebrew idea of resurrection, as opposed to the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul, is explained in a Christian sense most fully in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1st Corinthians. Luther preached on the text and affirmed, along with the apostle Paul, that our resurrected body would be very different from our mortal body. It would be imperishable and

unchangeable. As indicated in the resurrection appearances of Jesus, our resurrected body would have powers that our mortal body can't have. It can be in one place and then in another in an instant. Physical barriers can be penetrated without the benefit of openings, and so forth. Luther also held that the time between death and resurrection would be experienced as instantaneous. There would be no sense of the passage of time between death and resurrection.

Luther dealt with this subject more often while doing pastoral care rather than in his strictly theological reflections. He regularly wrote letters to the grief stricken telling them to take comfort in the fact that their loved ones died confessing Christ. This meant that they would pass through the narrow gate of death into the bright light of resurrected life. He and his wife Katie were totally grief stricken on the death of their daughter Magdalena. He told his friends that he had been dealt a mortal wound. However, over time, he took comfort in the conviction that she was with God and had been spared the grief and suffering life in the world.

Luther also spoke of judgment in the context of every person's task to come to terms with death. He spoke of the life of faith in this world as a kind of "kenosis", a self-emptying. Growth in faith means we enter into a process where we must lay aside our own sense of righteousness, all our attachments, and all the things that shape our lives in this world. It is therefore a process whereby we die to this world in order to be filled with the love of God in Christ. All of life is a preparation for death such that, when we are called out of this world, our transition is not painful but a joyful entering into the fullness of God's love and grace.

For people with no faith, death is a painful and hopeless affair. There is no sense of entering into a kingdom for which you have lived and hoped for throughout life in this world. Instead, there is only letting go of everything you held dear, everything that gave you joy, everything that shaped your life, everything you lived for. In this circumstance, death is like a black hole of nothingness, and judgment therefore leads to despair.

For people of faith, the crosses we bear challenge us to let go of life in this world and follow Christ into God's kingdom. While these crosses involve suffering and grief, over time our strength increases, and we are enabled to hold onto Christ alone. Luther cites Abraham as the clear example of this. At the end of his life, he could even let go of his beloved son Isaac because he firmly believed in God's promises. Luther also cites the story of Jacob when he wrestled with God. Jacob would not let go of this divine messenger until he blessed him. Similarly, we struggle to follow Christ while bearing our cross but we receive a blessing in return. Here, it appears that Luther sees judgment as the result of what we lived for. If we live for Christ, we received the blessing of eternal life and love. If we lived for idols, we experience despair and hopelessness, because in death we lose everything.

Finally, Luther also engaged this subject in connection with his struggle to reform the church. Because the church had become so toxic, and because the pope believed he had power over the salvation of souls making him the antichrist, Luther believed he was living in the end times. The pope and church doctrine usurped the authority of Christ, and therefore the place where people turned for saving grace had become an abomination, leading people

to misery instead of salvation. God had revealed the gospel to him as a last chance for people to turn to Christ for salvation. Luther therefore took his responsibility to preach and teach very seriously. "The gospel," he said, "was like a passing thunderstorm." It revealed the truth one last time, and he therefore was responsible to teach it faithfully such that people might turn to Christ in repentance and receive salvation before it was too late.

The destiny of our lives was sealed by the death and resurrection of Christ. Everything depended on his saving grace. Accepting it meant living in the joy of eternal resurrected life. Once again, it all boils down to one insight. "We are saved by grace through faith, not by words prescribed in the law." (Romans 3) Because of this, Luther said that if he knew the world would end tomorrow, he would plant an apple tree today."