

# The Development in Martin Luther's Understanding of the Afterlife

## *Comparing Quotations from Early and Late in His Career*

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### EARLY IN LUTHER'S CAREER:

*Early in his career, Luther accepted the traditional medieval Roman Catholic understanding of the afterlife that he had been taught from his childhood, including the Platonic distinction between body and soul, and the existence of purgatory, and the appeal to divine assistance from saints and angels:*

**From the 95 Thesis, written in 1517 AD: at Age 34**

"Hell, purgatory, and heaven seem to differ the same as despair, fear, and assurance of salvation. It seems as though for souls in purgatory, fear should necessarily decrease and love increase. Further, it does not seem proved that souls in purgatory are outside the state of merit, that is, unable to grow in love ... That power which the Pope has in general over purgatory corresponds to the power which any bishop or curate has in a particular way in his own diocese or parish. The Pope does very well when he grants remission to souls in purgatory ..."

**From a Sermon on Preparing to Die, 1519 AD: at Age 36**

"If God looks upon you, all the saints angels and all creatures will fix their eyes on you. And if you remain in that faith, all of them will uphold you with their hands. And when your soul leaves your body, they will be on hand to receive it, and you cannot perish."

### LATE IN LUTHER'S CAREER:

*Later in his career, Luther spoke in a different way about happens to people when they die, using the biblical metaphor for death as a sleep in which we rest as we await the resurrection. His emphasis was no longer on the permanence of human nature, but on his hope and faith in the promise of Christ:*

**From the Smalcald Articles, Luther's last statement of faith, 1537 AD: at Age 54**

"The mass has brought forth a brood of vermin and the poison of manifold idolatries. The first is purgatory ... Consequently purgatory and all the pomp, services, and business transactions associated with it are to be regarded as nothing else than illusions of the devil. For purgatory, too, is contrary to the fundamental article that Christ alone, and not the work of man, can help souls. Besides nothing has been consigned or enjoined upon us with reference to the dead: All this may consequently be discarded apart entirely from the fact that it is error and idolatry."

**From his Forward to a Collection of Funeral Hymns, in 1542 AD: at Age 59**

"We Christians, who have been redeemed through the precious blood of God's Son, should by practice become accustomed in faith to despise death, and to look upon it as a deep, sound, sweet sleep, to consider the coffin as nothing but our Lord's bosom or paradise, the grave nothing but a soft bed of ease and rest. And indeed, this is what it is before God; for he says 'Our friends Lazarus is sleeping' (John 11:11) and 'The maid is not dead, but sleeping.' (Matt. 9:24)"

**From a Sermon in 1543 AD, on the definition of the word "Cemetery": at Age 60**

"The Fathers called churchyards *coemeteria* (cemeteries), that is, places in which one sleeps, sleeping quarters, where Christians are buried; and I wish they were still so called [in German]. For so Isaiah says: "They shall rest in their beds.' (57:2). To them the grave is not a tomb, but as it were, a bed in which they sleep until the time comes when they are to be awakened. (Isaiah 26:19)."

**From a Sermon in 1539 AD, on the story of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter: at Age 56**

"Since death is called a sleep, we know that we shall not remain in it; but we shall awake and live again, and the time during which we sleep cannot be long. It will seem as if we just dropped off, so that we shall rebuke ourselves for having been appalled and frightened at so fine a sleep in the hour of death. And so from grave and corruption we shall in a moment go to meet our Lord and Savior Christ in the clouds. We shall be alive, entirely sound and vigorous, with a clean bright transfigured body. We should, therefore, with all confidence and joy commit and commend our soul, body, and life to Christ, as to our faithful Savior and Redeemer. Even as we must without all care, commit our life to him in bodily sleep and rest, certain that we shall not lose it, as it seems, but kept safely and well in his hand, it will be sustained and restored to us."