

The Reformer as Son—Luther and his Mother (May 20, 1531)

Abstract

Margarethe Luther (née Lindemann, 1460–1531) came from a middle-class family in Eisenach. She married Hans Luder, a miner and copper smelter, and moved with him to Eisleben in 1482. There, in 1483, she gave birth to a son, Martin, who would grow up to write his now famous 95 Theses. On May 20, 1531, Martin Luther composed this letter to his mother after hearing that she was seriously ill. It is less the letter of a son than one of a pastor, a short theological treatise in which he urges his mother to thank God for rescuing her from false (Roman) religion and for bringing her to the true Word of God and the hope of salvation.

Source

Martin Luther to his Mother Margarethe, widowed Luther

[Wittenberg] May 20, 1531

Grace and peace in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, Amen.

My dearly beloved Mother! I have received my brother Jacob's letter regarding your illness, and I am deeply distressed, especially since I cannot be with you in person, as I would dearly like to be. And yet, with this letter, I come to you in person, and, together with all the members of our family, I shall not to be absent from you in spirit.

Though I hope that your heart has long since been abundantly instructed, and that—God be praised—you have internalized his comforting word, and that you are also everywhere provided with ample preachers and comforters, I will nevertheless seek to do my part and, in keeping with my duty, acknowledge myself as your child and you as my mother, as our God and Creator has made us and bound us to each other by mutual duties, so that I may add myself to the number of your comforters.

First, my dear Mother, you well know by the Grace of God that your illness is his gracious fatherly rod. It is in fact a minor rod compared to the one he inflicts upon the godless, indeed, even upon his own beloved children, for one is beheaded, another burned to death, the third drowned, and so on, so that all of us must declare: "For Thy sake we are killed all the day long and are like sheep for the slaughter." Therefore, let such illness neither aggrieve nor trouble you. Rather, accept it with gratitude, see it as being sent by his Grace, as being a mere trifle—though it may lead to death—compared to the suffering of his own dear son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who suffered not for himself, as we must do, but for us and our sins.

Second, my dear Mother, you know the true center and foundation of your salvation, the one in whom you should seek your consolation in this and all distress, namely the cornerstone, Jesus Christ, who will never waver or fail us, nor let us sink or perish. For he is the Savior and is called the Savior of all poor sinners and of all who are in a state of suffering and near death, provided they trust in him and invoke his name.

He says: "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." If he has overcome the world, he has certainly also overcome the prince of the world, with all his power. And what is his power but death, with which he has made us his subjects, held us captive on account of our sin? But since death and sin have now been

overcome, we may listen with joy and comfort to the sweet word: “Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” And let us not doubt this word, it is surely true, and what is more, we are also commanded to accept this comfort with joy and thanksgiving. And whosoever would not allow himself to be comforted by such words would do injustice and the utmost dishonor to the dear comforter, as though it were not true that he has commanded us to be comforted, or as though it were not true that he has overcome the world; [if we were to do this] we would strengthen the conquered devil, sin, and death, making him once again our tyrant in opposition to the dear Savior. May God save us from this.

Therefore we may now rejoice with all certainty and joyfulness, and should any thought of sin or death frighten us, let us lift up our heart against it and say: “Behold, dear soul, what are you doing? Dear death, dear sin, how do you manage to live and frighten me? Do you not know that you have been overcome, and that you, death, are dead? Do you not know the one who says of you: “I have overcome the world?” It becomes me not to either listen or give heed to your terror; rather, I should hear the consoling word of my Savior. “Be of good cheer, be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

This is the victor, the true hero, who thus gives and consigns to me his victory: “Be of good cheer!” I shall remain by him, I shall cling to his word and consolation, no matter whether I stay here or journey yonder, for he does not lie to me. Your false terror would gladly deceive me and tear me from this victor and savior with lying thoughts. But they are all lies, just as certainly as it is true that he has overcome you, and has commanded us to be comforted.

Saint Paul also boasts in this way and defies the terror of death: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” You can terrify and provoke like a wooden image of death, but you have no power to destroy. For your victory, sting, and power have been swallowed up in the victory of Christ. You may bare your teeth, but you cannot bite. For God has given us victory over you, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, praise and thanks be to him, Amen.

Let your heart concern itself, dear Mother, with such words and thoughts, and none other, and may you be thankful that God has brought you to such knowledge and has not left you mired in the Popish error that taught us to rely on our works and the holiness of monks, and to regard this one consolation, our Savior, not as a comforter, but as a cruel judge and tyrant, so that we had to flee from him to Mary and the saints, and could not look to him for any grace or comfort.

But now we know otherwise of the boundless goodness and mercy of our Heavenly Father, [we know] that Jesus Christ is our mediator and throne of grace, our bishop in heaven before God, who daily intercedes on our behalf, and atones for all who believe only in him and call upon him, and [we know] that he is neither a judge nor cruel, except to those who do not believe in him or who fail to accept his comfort and grace, and that he is not the man who accuses or threatens us, but rather the one who atones for us and intercedes on our behalf through his own death and blood, which was shed for us, so that we shall not fear him, but rather move toward him with all certainty and call him: Dear Savior, you sweet comforter, you faithful bishop of our souls etc.

To such knowledge (I say) God has graciously called you, of that you possess his seal and letter, namely the Gospel, baptism, and the sacrament, as you hear preached, namely, so that you shall have no trouble or danger. Be of good cheer, then, and give thanks with joy for such great grace! For he who has started this with you will also end it graciously. For we cannot help ourselves in such matters, we cannot do anything to ward off sin, death, and the devil with our works, for this [purpose] another appears in our stead and for our sake, one who can do it better, who gives us his victory and commands us to accept it, and not to question it, and who says: “Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world;” and again: “I live, and you too will live, and no one shall rob you of your joy.”

The Father and God of all consolation bestows upon you through his Holy Word and Spirit a solid, joyful,

and grateful faith, so that you may blessedly overcome this and all danger, and may once and for all taste and experience that what he says of himself is true: “Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” And with this I commend your body and soul to His mercy, Amen.

All your children and my Käte pray for you as well. Some weep, some dine and say: “Grandmother is very sick. God’s Grace be with us all, Amen.”

On the Sunday after Ascensionis Domini, MDXXXI

Your loving son

Mart. Luther

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