

Luther Experienced Loss of Loved Ones

Many have experienced the loss of a loved one. We mourn for both those that died in faith and those that didn't. Separation caused by death seems so final. We that are living are not prepared for the sorrow of parting and the grief that follows. We pray for peace. God sends His escorts to comfort and uplift. Sorrows are shared; we are encouraged to cast our burdens on the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Martin and Katharina Luther lost two of their children. He rejoiced that his children were safe in heaven. Luther wrote about his feelings, which are shared in this Home and Family writing.

Luther Mourns

In 1525, a believing former monk and a believing former nun were married. Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora's marriage was loving and joyful. The gospel abounded in their home. God blessed them.

God gifted them with six children. It was a bustling household. At any given time, there were refugees from other countries, dignitaries, royals, and many students and teachers there. Their home was filled with discussions around the Holy Scriptures and living faith, music and singing, and laughter. Luther enjoyed the visiting and had a very generous heart. Katharina (Katie) managed the whole thing with their meager income.

It is important to remember that in Luther's day, with limited medical treatment and catastrophic diseases, like the plague, death was a frequent visitor in homes and families. Grief and sorrow beset many.

“Pray to the Lord for Me”

Sorrow struck deeply in Luther's home on December 10, 1527. Their second child, under one-year-old, died during an outbreak of the plague. They were devastated.

“My baby daughter, little Elizabeth, has passed away. It is amazing what a sick heart ... she has left to me, so much grief for her overcomes me. Never before would I have believed that a father's heart could have such tender feelings for his child. Do pray to the Lord for me” (*Luther's Works* 49:203).

It was during this time that Luther said, “There is no sweeter union than that in a good marriage. Nor is there any death more bitter than that which separates a married couple. Only the death of children comes close to this; how much this hurts I have myself experienced.”

Tragedy struck again in 1542. Their beloved 14-year-old daughter Magdalena became gravely ill. When Katie realized the gravity of the child's illness, she began to weep uncontrollably. Luther reminded her that children have simple faith, little fear, and die as if going to sleep.

As the illness became worse, Luther said, “I love her very much. But if it is Thy will to take her, dear God, I shall be glad to know that she is with Thee.”

Afterward he said to her, as she was lying in bed, “Dear Magdalene, my little daughter, you would be glad to stay here with me, your father. Are you also glad to go to your Father in heaven?”

The sick girl replied, “Yes, dear father, as God wills.”

Luther said, “You dear little girl!” Then he turned away and said to those present, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. I love her very much. If the flesh is so strong, what must the spirit be?”

Among other things, he then said, “In the last thousand years God has given to no bishop such great gifts as He has given me (for one should boast of God’s gifts). I’m angry with myself that I’m unable to rejoice from my heart and be thankful to God, though I do at times sing a little song and thank God. Whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.”

“When their daughter was in the agony of death, he fell on his knees before the bed and, weeping bitterly, prayed that God might will to save her. Thus she gave up the ghost in the arms of her father. Her mother was in the same room, but farther from the bed on account of her grief. It was the ninth hour on the Wednesday after the fifteenth Sunday after Trinity in the year 1542” (*Luther’s Works* 54:431).

I Am Joyful, but Have Sorrow Too

We all have experienced the death of a loved one. We see here the agony of a mother and father facing the death of their children. We have had the same experiences—knowing and believing through the Holy Spirit that they are in heaven, yet through the flesh feeling the incredible pain of death’s intrusion as it takes a loved one from us.

Martin Luther said of the death of beloved Magdalena: “When Magdalene died, I am joyful in spirit but I am sad according to the flesh. The flesh doesn’t take kindly to this. The separation troubles me beyond measure. It’s strange to know that she is surely at peace and that she is well off there, very well off, and yet to grieve so much.”

As the coffin was taken from their home, Luther said, “I’ve just sent a saint to heaven—yes, a living saint. Would that our death might be like this.” Again, turning to others, he said, “Do not be sorrowful. I have sent a saint to heaven. In fact, I have now sent two of them” (*Luther’s Works* 54:432–33).

It Is a Comforted Sorrow

Even now, we may remember dear loved ones who have passed away—some many years past, or some very recent. The pain of separation stings gravely. Sorrow returns. Yet, when our loved one has died in living faith, it is not an un comforted sorrow. Tears flow. Tears of joy mingle in.

Our Heavenly Father reminds us that the day of death of a child of God is better than the day of birth. “A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one’s birth” (Eccl. 7:1).

It pays to believe. Heaven awaits.

George Koivukangas

Discussion Points:

1. Contrast the sudden passing of a young person to an old person. Why is the former so startling and the later not so?
2. Should we consider the death of a young believing person as a tragedy or expression of God’s love?
3. Considering the sudden passing of a friend/loved one: What went unsaid that you wish you could have told them?

4. Reflecting on the prolonged illness of a person, young or old: What thoughts come to mind?
5. How can you preserve the memory of a loved one?
6. What one thing do you remember most of a friend/loved one who passed away?
7. What passages of the Bible help us comfort one who is ill or dying?