

We give thanks to You, our God, who has hitherto graciously and mightily helped us in all our needs. Be our refuge and our help, and when our last day comes, grant that we fall asleep commending our souls into the hands of Your Son, Jesus Christ, confident that through His name our death is precious in Your sight. Amen. (Reading the Psalms with Luther, CPH, Ps. 116, p. 280)

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing... At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom. To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, whose reappearance is awaited with eager anticipation by all who love His teachings, dear fellow redeemed:

How do you define a blessed end at the hour of death? No pain? Quick and sudden? Leaving no loved ones behind destitute and alone in this life? Perhaps those are part of your definition when you contemplate your end in this life. However, a blessed end for a Christian is defined more specifically according to a spiritual calm and peace, confident of forgiveness and eternal life.

But such a desired end is not something we control, nor can we orchestrate for ourselves. Such preparation is the work of God alone, thus we pray for it and often in the prayer our Lord has taught us. **Unless God Preserves Us, We Would Be Unsafe Everyday.**

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The Apostle Paul was nearing the end of his life, not that he knew the future but he had already experienced one Roman imprisonment and was likely to face execution after this now the

second. "the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day." He had confidence for Jesus' sake, but he was now concerned about those under Pastor Timothy's care. He, like all pastors, were charged with this task: "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."

Myths abounded in those days just as they do today. They are myths about God's identity and His relationship with us, the human race. God's truth, His word, has the power to preserve us in the faith unto our end. But as Paul observes: "the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." All such myths do not have the power to save, but only the power to deceive and pull sinners away from THE way of life.

Think of the itching ears out there today which desire to hear that all religions lead to heaven, or that even all who think they are spiritual but belong to no organized religion at all will go to heaven! It especially becomes a desire to hear when the person appears to be nearing his/her death. Sometimes the loudest message that can and should be preached is when a faithful Christian pastor must refuse to conduct a Christian burial for a person who did not confess Christ as Savior in this life. The survivors asking for such a ceremony may be shocked, even hurt by a pastor's refusal, but it is a message that must be heard, lest a confusing and harmful one is given.

To be spiritually unsafe in this life is not to know and trust in the one way of salvation, Christ Jesus. But again, you and I cannot cause ourselves to find nor even keep that safe position on our own. God must be the One acting upon us so that we are safe. Paul observed a time when he was in danger. He said: "At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. ... But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me." Where was His Lord at that vulnerable time? - in His living and abiding Word. While there was no pastor, not even a fellow Christian to declare to him the love of God for him in Christ, Paul was committed to preaching it to others and thereby heard and applied it to himself. As he acknowledged: "I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom." The rescue is always by God's acting in our lives, never our own actions.

The devil is called the lion who seeks to devour you spiritually, tempting you to deny Christ and to turn to yourself or others to prepare for that Day when you must appear before the Judge. But you have nothing to offer to redeem yourself from your sin and be spared from the eternal death you deserve. No one else has the answer for your sin or has the ability to save you from hell. Only Christ Jesus, who came to our world in your place, has done this for you, me and all people of all time.

You rightly pray to our Lord repeatedly – *“deliver us from evil.”* You pray this in confidence that the Lord desires to do this for you. As we read: *“We pray in this petition ... that our Father in heaven would deliver us from every evil of body and soul, property and honor; and at last, when the hour of death shall come, grant us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven.”* Is this your confidence every time you pray this? Is this your confidence throughout your life as a Christian, in good days and in evil days?

We all have to admit that our enemies: the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh assail us with many doubts, especially having us turn inward, and finding there countless reasons to question that we will ever make it. There we are unsafe and vulnerable to despair.

Over the years as pastor I have heard especially from outsiders attending a funeral or other churchly event when they have heard a sermon that it is obvious I really believe what I said. Yes, of course I do, but the observation is usually made that I am pastor and this is the reason for my confidence. Rather, I am a Christian and believe this. As pastor I too get tempted with doubts, but the source of all such doubts is my sinful nature, which cannot deal with my sin and death on its own. I too must cry out with Paul: “Oh what a wretched man I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?” Turning inward I find nothing good in me. But God directs my eyes of faith to His Son alone, who was condemned in my place. I have been rescued from all that I deserve by the blood and righteousness of His Son.

This is how all Christians are preserved unto the end, by God’s gracious working. Here, we are saturated with our Lord’s Word and images that underscore His everlasting grace. I pray that your home also has that Word throughout the week found in devotionals and images of His daily and ever abiding grace.

If one of our members is on his/her deathbed in a hospital, I rejoice when it is at St. Joseph’s or St. Clare’s. Despite the errant theology of the Roman Church, the image of the crucified Christ is usually prominently displayed on the wall within sight of the patient. Such words as *“O Sacred Head Now Wounded”*, *“O Lamb of God Pure*

and Holy", *"What Wondrous Love Is This?"* could well fill their hearts and minds during those quiet moments of private reflection. Take note how it is that many of our Lutheran hymns end with a "funeral verse" about dying a blessed death.

My fellow redeemed, for Jesus' sake, you are not unsafe today, tomorrow or forever. You have permanently and eternally been delivered from sin, death and hell. God has secured this deliverance from all evil for you in His Son. He continues daily through the work of the Holy Spirit to preserve you in this faith every day even in the face of these ongoing attacks. In Christ Jesus your Savior you have a blessed end awaiting you. Rest easy in Him now and then also forevermore. Amen.