

What path brings us to heartfelt forgiveness of one another for every sin? Dear brothers and sisters, whoever has had the experience of God tearing him out of great sin and forgiving him; whomever God has sent a brother in such an hour to whom he could tell his sin; whoever knows the struggle the sinner wages against this help because he does not want to let himself be helped; and whoever nevertheless has discovered that his brother has absolved him from his sin in the name of God and in prayer—from such a one, all passion for judging and bearing grudges disappears; he wants only one more thing: to share in the plight of his brother, to serve, to help, to forgive, without measure, without conditions, without end. He can hate his sinful brother no longer, but loves him all the more, and forgives him everything, everything. O Lord, our God, let us experience your mercy, that we may practice mercy without end! Amen. Amen. [GS, IV, pp. 399–406]

## Learning to Die

(Memorial Day, Finkenwalde)

November 24, 1935

TEXT: Rev. 14:6–13

“And I saw”—the curtain tears, and John gets to see that which for us is concealed by a thick veil—the world after death. So much is clear at once: that world is anything but dead; it is alive to the highest degree, full of action, full of visions, full of words, full of torment, and full of bliss—the world after death is life in the highest degree. It is not a nothing, not an extinction that awaits us when we close our eyes for the last time; rather, we go to meet undreamed of events. Let no one take comfort in the false consolation: after all, everything will be over before long; rather, let him be told: before long, everything will begin; before long now, things will become quite grave, quite critical for you.

Our text intends to help us prepare for the step into that other world. *How do Christians, how does Christ's congregation, learn to die?* That is the question, and our text gives the answer. A threefold glad tidings is preached to us from that world today, as a comfort on Memorial Day, as an aid to dying.

“And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach. . . .” When we see such visions, when we see angels of God, then we are no longer in this world; rather we see heaven opened and the new world. The angel flies in the midst of heaven with the *everlasting gospel*. In other words, it belongs in the middle of heaven as it does in the middle of earth—the everlasting gospel. That is great comfort to all the faithful: *the everlasting gospel does remain*—it is an everlasting gospel; our gospel, as we hear it and preach it Sunday after Sunday; the gospel, which we have with us in our Bibles, reading it morning and evening, which gave a new turn to our lives once, when we understood it correctly for the first time; the gospel, here ridiculed and attacked and dragged through the mud—and yet, covertly and se-

cretly believed; the gospel, openly confessed by martyrs of all times—the gospel remains forever. Therefore, we needn't fear or worry at all, even if it looks as if the gospel were foundering today. What are ten years, or even longer, that we pass through and survey at a glance? The gospel is everlasting and remains despite all. It remains the one and only true proclamation of God in all the world.

And if there are thousands of religions and persuasions and beliefs and ideologies in the world; and if they be the most splendid of ideologies and touch and move people's hearts—yet death frustrates them all; they must all break to pieces, because they are not true. Only the gospel remains. And before the end comes, it will be preached to every people, kindred, and tongue, throughout the entire world. Even if it seems here that there would be many ways, yet there is only one way for all people on this earth: the gospel.

And his language is so simple that everyone must understand it: "Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters." That is the first commandment, the entire gospel. "Fear God"—instead of the many things which you fear. Do not fear the coming day; do not fear other people, do not fear power and might, even if they are able to deprive you of property and life; do not fear the great ones of this world; do not even fear yourselves; do not fear sin. All this fear will be the death of you. You are free from all this fear; it isn't there for you. But fear God and him alone; for he has power over the powers of this world; the whole world must fear him—he has power to give us life or to destroy us; everything else is a game—only God is in earnest, entirely in earnest. Fear God's earnestness—and give him the glory. He demands it as the creator of the world, as our creator he demands it as the reconciler, who made peace between God and man in Christ; he demands it as the Savior, who will liberate us in the end from all sin and burden. Give glory to him in his holy gospel—"for the hour of his judgment is come."

What will God ask about on that day of judgment that we are approaching? At the judgment, God will ask us solely about his everlasting gospel: Did you believe and obey the gospel? He won't ask whether we were Germans or Jews, whether we were Nazis or not, not even whether we belonged to the Confessing Church or not; nor whether we were great and influential and successful, nor whether we have a life's work to show for ourselves, nor whether we were honored by the world or unimportant and insignificant, unsuccessful and unappreciated. All persons shall be asked by God one day whether they could risk submitting to the test of the gospel. The gospel alone shall be our judge.

The road divides for eternity at the gospel. When we know this, and yet see how the gospel is disregarded among us—both in the world *and in the church*—then we may well become fearful.

Therefore, let us make note of that first vision that John saw: an everlasting gospel—the eternal proclamation to all peoples, the eternal

judgment on mankind—an everlasting gospel; that is the sole and enduring comfort to the congregation of the faithful; that is glad tidings for all who have yet to die.

"Another angel, a second, followed, saying, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion.'" That is what John saw—but he also saw something else namely, that Babylon was still great, powerful, and full of strength, that Babylon still stood there invincible in the world with all people trembling and throwing themselves down before her—Babylon, the enemy of God—the city which does not cease building her tower up into the heavens—Babylon, which willfully defies Christ the crucified Lord, which intoxicates the world with her glittering and enticing vices, as prostitutes intoxicate their lovers with heavy wine—which transforms and corrupts and woos the world with every kind of pomp and godless splendor—Babylon, whom the world loves, with whom the world is infatuated, running blindly into her nets—Babylon, which demands nothing else from her worshippers than blind love and intoxication—which gives them liberally and prodigally all that their hearts and wild desires crave—who would dare say of this Babylon, she is not eternal, she will have a great fall? With that anxiety does the Christian congregation, which neither can nor desires to be a citizen of this city, which must live and suffer on the margin, outside the city; with what anxiety must it view that city; with how many prayers must it intercede for her; with how many prayers has it longed for her fall to come! Who is Babylon? Was she Rome? Where is she today? Today, we dare not yet say—not because we fear the world! Rather because the Christian community does not know yet—but it sees terrible things and revelations drawing near.

And now—the voice from heaven, the joyful news for the community of the faithful: she is fallen, Babylon the great! Everything is already done; the judgment has already been handed down by God. Babylon is already condemned—Babylon cannot remain standing, because she cannot stand in the sight of God. Therefore, do not fear Babylon; she can do nothing against you—she is already condemned! She is nothing. Like dust and gloom and rubble. Don't take her seriously, so deadly seriously; don't be consumed in your hatred or zeal, for it is all so temporary; so temporary—she is no longer the least bit important; but entirely different things are important—remain steadfast in faith, cling to Christ, listen to the voice of God the omnipotent, who says: remain untouched by Babylon; stay sober, and don't let fear overcome you; she is fallen, Babylon the great. That alone is important, that alone leads to life. He who becomes Babylon's slave, however, he becomes slave to death and judgment. Babylon is fallen; let the congregation of the faithful rejoice! That is the second glad tidings to the congregation that must go to death.

"And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, if anyone worship the beast. . . ." The beast is Babylon's lord, the man of blasphemy, presumption, and violence. And this is the terrible thing: it

is not enough for the beast that people serve him; rather, he demands that they mark themselves with his sign on foreheads and hands, that they belong to him visibly with will and deed; the beast demands to be professed! As Christians mark themselves with the sign of the Cross, so the beast demands that those who belong to him be marked with an "x" for blasphemy. And they worship the beast, saying: Who is greater or more powerful than this beast? Who would want to resist him? Who is more splendid or godlike? And all those worship him whose names are not written in the Book of Life, whose names are not chosen or pleasing before God and Christ, whose names are a blasphemy of God.

"The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God. . . ." The wrath of God is a burning, unmingled wine, which a person feels unto the very core of his being. Unspeakingly dreadful things are named now. There is nothing to add. How can such a message give us cause to rejoice? "Tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb." In their torment, they shall have to see Christ, whom they drove away. "The smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever," "no rest day and night." Presented with such words, let us indeed not grow loud; rather, let us reflect silently, saying: God, have mercy upon us sinners and grant your salvation to us all; to you alone belongs the glory. You alone are righteous, you have provided us with peace in the face of our enemies. Yes, you alone are our comfort and our joy!

No, in the face of God's terrible judgment on the world, let us not break out into the howling of a sectarian crusade, but rather ask: God, give your saints patience despite all our impatience: give your congregation obedience to your commandment of love—despite all our disobedience; give faith in Jesus—despite all our unbelief. And then, when you come and approach us, demanding that we stand before you; then say to us too: "Here is the patience of the saints; here are they that keep the commandments of God, and faith in Jesus"—God, it is all your grace.

Will we comprehend now, that in light of this judgment of God, in light of this temptation to fall into hatred and impatience and unbelief—that today it is a blessing to die, to be taken away? For who among us knows whether he will endure to the end? Who knows how he will stand in the hour of the last trial? Therefore: "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth." Blessed are the dead—we must understand this—not from weariness, not from listlessness, but from the fear of not keeping faith, and with the joy of having kept faith—blessed are the dead "from henceforth"—starting from such times when the power of Babylon and the beast grow to be immense. But not all the dead are blessed; rather those "which die in the Lord," those who learned how to die in time, who kept faith, who clung to Jesus up to the last hour, whether amidst the sufferings of the first martyrs, or in the martyrdom of a silent loneliness. The promise of death's blessedness, which is the

resurrection, is solely for the congregation of Jesus Christ. It belongs to this congregation, and whoever else lays claim to it stands in God's way. "Blessed are the dead which die *in the Lord*." To die in Christ—that this be granted us, that our last hour not be a weak hour, that we die as confessors of Christ, whether old or young, whether quickly or after long suffering, whether seized and laid hold of by the lord of Babylon or quietly and gently—that is our prayer today, that our last word might only be: Christ.

"Yes, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them." And then there shall be rest from our labors, that is, from the strain and the sin and the temptations that we stand under today; there shall be no more fear of growing weak, no fear of sin and of the force of Babylon; then there shall be rest, because we shall see and recognize Christ as the Lord. "And their works do follow them"—they do not pave the way for us to Christ, for faith does that—but they follow, the works that are done in God, in Christ, for which he prepared us from the very beginning of the world; we don't recognize them here; they are hidden; they are the works about which the left hand knows not what the right hand does. But they shall be with us, because they belong to us as the everlasting gift of God.

With your gospel, Lord, teach your congregation to die. Give us strength to endure until you call. We want to behold your eternal gospel. Amen. [GS, V, pp. 569–76]