LIVING with GRIEF
Bound by Sorrow, Wrapped in Comfort

Kristian Kincaid
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Kristian Kincaid has, more than anyone else, taught me the joys
and the blessings of being a pastor. He is for me a father in the faith.
I am overwhelmingly thankful that the Lord saw fit to call me to
serve alongside a man of steadfast faithfulness, who in Christian
love and compassion tends to the people of God.

I have worked with Kristian for more than a decade. With Kristian,
it is not about which one of us preaches or teaches, nor is it about
which one of us visits the sick, tends to the suffering, or prays with
the dying. With Kristian, it is about Christ. Sinners need a Savior
and, following the example of John the Baptist, Kristian Kincaid is
simply one pointing to Jesus and declaring, “Behold, the Lamb of
God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

“It is all about Christ.” Those were some of the first words that
Kristian told me when I received my call to be his assistant. “It is
all about Christ.” Those were the words he repeated to me as he
showed me the church where I would be working. “It is all about
Christ.” Those were the words he spoke when I was ordained and
installed in the congregation. Far from being cheap or empty words,
those words were spoken from the depths of a pastoral heart and
were meant to encourage, to strengthen, and to comfort the soul.

Over the years, my respect and admiration for Kristian has only
grown. His example of Christian love and faithfulness has been one
of the greatest benefits to me. He has shown me how to follow St.
Paul’s admonition to preach the Word; to be ready in season and
out of season; to reprove, rebuke, and exhort with patience and
teaching. He has taught me how to give thanks to the Lord in every
circumstance. He has helped me see, even more clearly, the surpassing
worth that comes from knowing Christ Jesus, our Lord. Kindness, compassion, and love are all hallmarks of Kristian’s interactions with members and nonmembers alike. In all that is said and done, he seeks to give hope in Christ, whose steadfast love never ceases and whose mercies never come to an end.

As you will read in the following pages, Kristian is no stranger to sorrow and grief. I have watched him as grief strikes, I have sat with him in the midst of sorrow, and I have been with him as he is forced to relive the hurt and the pain. Grief and sorrow hurt. There is no approach or strategy that can ease the pain. Attempts to dull the senses give no relief. Lying spirits will only add grief upon grief and sorrow on sorrow. For Kristian, help is found in the name of the Lord. Comfort flows from the cross of Christ, and strength pours forth from the empty tomb of Jesus. There is simply no other place to go, for Christ alone has the words of eternal life.

With Kristian, every sermon, every Bible class, every pastoral visit is about Christ. There, the One who was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities says, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). To come to Christ, to hear His Word, and to receive His gifts is comfort, strength, life, and salvation for the Christian. I pray that, in this book, you will see Kristian’s work as I have always seen it, pointing you to Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

I am deeply indebted to Kristian for his faithfulness, and I am pleased to call him my mentor, my brother, and my friend. I will be eternally grateful for his constant reminders to me that while times of sorrow and sadness do come, there is never a time when I do not have Christ.

Jesse K. Cearlock, Associate Pastor
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Dubuque, Iowa
Author's Preface

This book was extremely painful to write. I walked away from the work innumerable times. I resumed writing, realizing that this book is not about me but about Christ and the full measure of comfort He provides. Pointing you to my sorrows is meaningless. Pointing to the unfailing grace and mercy of Jesus Christ for you is meaningful in the truest and purest sense of the word. How He loves you!
“Pastor, how can I go on?” sobbed Esther, her words barely audible. Esther’s husband of over fifty years had died in the parking lot of a grocery store an hour earlier. Oscar had kissed Esther on the cheek as he reviewed the list of items she penned for him to purchase. The requested bread, milk, and eggs were strewn in the parking lot when Oscar collapsed of a massive heart attack. Esther’s familiar routine was forever broken. Her tear-filled eyes focused directly on me. What was I to say in response to her question?

Words failed me. I had been serving as a pastor for only a few weeks when Oscar died. My days were filled with preparing sermons, visiting the sick, and making introductory calls on members of the parish. Death interrupted Esther’s life and the ease of my routine. I was hurled into the valley where the brokenhearted reside. Esther’s singular question led to a plethora of questions flooding my mind: What was Esther really going through? What could I do to help her? Which seminary classes addressed this? What stage of grief was she in, and which was next? How does the death of a loved one impact the living? Does everyone grieve in the same way? Does time really heal all wounds? What does she need from her pastor? What was I to say to her? How could she go on?

I sought the counsel of an older, wiser pastor. “I just had a funeral,” he told me. “The fellow died of cancer. I called on his wife a few days after the burial and prayed with her. As far as I am concerned, it’s a wrap. What are you so worried about?” He was
confident; I agonized. He was done; I wasn’t sure how to begin. He proceeded to briefly review the stages of grief with me, said something about “acceptance,” took a swig of coffee, and told me how busy he was. All I could think of as I walked out of his office was Esther’s tears falling from her face as we prayed. Her question was raw and honest; a glib answer was not fitting. “It’s a wrap” rang painfully hollow in my ears.

To care for the grieving is an ongoing pastoral challenge. Whether the parish is large or small, urban or rural, newly formed or long established, the grieving are on the rolls and in the pews of every congregation. The wounded soul stands in need of comfort. Comfort is needed when you are called to the hospital because a young wife has been killed in a car crash. As you enter the emergency room, you see a young man, now a widower, standing over his wife’s lifeless body, sobbing and stroking her blond hair streaked with dried blood. Comfort is needed as you wait in a hospital corridor to tell a teenage girl that her dad just died in the intensive care ward. Comfort is needed when an expectant mother miscarries at home and holds the dead child, so small and still, in her trembling hands. Stand beside the young widower, the teenage girl, the once-expectant mother. Catch their tears. How can they go on?

In over thirty years of parish ministry, I have learned lessons in emergency rooms, hospital hallways, nursing homes, personal residences, funeral homes, and cemeteries. Difficult but important lessons about grief from the grieving. My understanding concerning grief has been deepened and enriched as I have listened to the voices of the sorrowing themselves—widows and widowers, sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, single and married, young and old.
These lessons inform us that grief is highly personal, diverse, and idiosyncratic. Grief ebbs and flows, intensifies and lessens, returns and abates. Time is no healer of wounds. Grief impacts us emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Grief is never completely assuaged this side of heaven. One copes with grief but is not cured. One common denominator has surfaced amid the diversity of grief I have encountered—the necessity, efficacy, and comfort of God’s Holy Word, which is true balm for the broken heart. To all who grieve, the Lord affords rich and abiding comfort through Word and Sacrament. Simply put, but deeply profound, is the truth that at all times, in every circumstance, for each precious sorrowing soul, Christ is our comfort.

In my estimation, numerous strategies for dealing with the grieving and the various stages thrust upon them are hollow and comfortless. None of us has just the right words, strategies, understanding, or tactics to cure the wounded soul. Our self-important hubris is exposed. We are not the white knight riding in on a charging steed brandishing our perceived wisdom as a sword to cut through the sorrow and dispel the darkness. The words “It’s a wrap” should never fall from our lips.

Numerous books on grief that I have perused through the years oddly lacked inquiry into the grieving themselves. Most egregiously, these secular works omit the font of comfort, Jesus Christ, our risen Savior, and the treasure chest of Holy Scripture, Holy Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. Book after book placed theories upon the shoulders of the sorrowing, as well as stages to work through, models to consider, and various other strategies, all with the goal of “getting over this and moving on.” The effort of the sorrowing individual was the sole focus. Is this not adding sweat to their tears?
In contrast, we can speak of the sorrowing as simply receiving the gift of comfort from Christ, who wipes away our every tear.

We learn valuable insights into grief by simply asking, “What are you going through?” We inquire honestly and listen intently. Which fosters understanding into grief: telling someone, “You are in stage 1 of grief,” or asking, “How are you?” Where is the greater insight gleaned: by dictating, “Work for that final stage of acceptance,” or inquiring, “Tell me, what are you going through?”

I have not only stood with the sorrowing; I am one. I must add my frail voice to the sad song of grief.

• Six months after Oscar died, I received a phone call from my father in Waverly, Iowa. His words were brief: “Mom died.” A massive heart attack had ended her life. She was 60. Stanza 1.

• Ten years later, a hospice nurse met me at the Bartels nursing home in Waverly. “I’m so sorry; you’re too late. Your dad died twenty minutes ago.” Stanza 2.

• Less than three years later, my sister, Karen Ann, was dropped off at Dulles Airport by her husband, Peter, to board American Airlines Flight 77 to Los Angeles. It was the morning of September 11, 2001. She was 40. Stanza 3.

• My wife, Jennifer, and I were eagerly expecting our fourth child. A routine ultrasound at the doctor’s office changed everything as it revealed a small body, motionless, weeks old, dead. Stanza 4.

We all sing the song of sorrow. No one is immune from grief, as the life of every human being encompasses peaks and valleys. Peak moments such as a wedding, the birth of a child, or an anniversary exhilarate us. “Life is good,” we shout, standing above the clouds
on the mountain peak, high above any valley. The air is crisp, cool, and energizing. The sky is deep blue, a sight to behold. What a scenic vista. Oh, that these moments would never end.

Deep and dark valleys of sorrow also exist for each one of us. We will face them time and time again. “Life is no good,” we mutter. “Where did the blue sky go? Why is it so hard to breathe?” When the doctor says, “This is serious, please sit down,” we are in an ominous valley. The crisp air is gone. When the phone rings in the middle of the night and we hear, “There has been an accident,” we are in a deep, dark valley and there is no hint of blue above. When the casket of one we love is in clear view before our eyes, our knees buckle in the valley of grief. The terrain is parched and dry. Thick, dark clouds swirl and engulf us.

We are hapless and helpless. Death has shattered the ease of our routine. One moment, all was well; now, all is ill. The scenic peak on which we stood has crashed to the ground, taking us with it. Our lives will never be the same again. We cannot rewind time and undo that which has been done. Each step is taxing and laborious as we grope in the dark valley of sorrow. We claim the words of Job as our own, “I was at ease, and He broke me apart” (Job 16:12). There is a gaping hole within us that we cannot fill, a deep wound that we cannot bind. Our heart is broken and shattered. We cannot flee this deep, dark terrain, as it proves an endless labyrinth of crevices and boulders. Furthermore, no one seems to understand. In our loneliness, we lament, “I am a brother of jackals and a companion of ostriches” (Job 30:29). Questions keep hounding us as answers prove elusive. “Why did this happen? Where is God? What will I do now?” On our knees in this valley, our lips slowly move to whisper, “How can I go on?” Esther, is that you?
FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–8. Which peak and valley moments are mentioned?

   Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 mentions peak moments such as birth, harvest, healing, laughter, and dancing. Valley moments include death, weeping, and mourning. Each human life consists of such moments. Our comfort amid such change is the changeless Christ.

2. How would you describe peak moments in your life?

   Peak moments could include birthdays, the date of your marriage, the birth of a child, a promotion at work, and spending time with family—joyous times. Not to be overlooked is the comfort of receiving God’s gifts through Word and Sacrament in His house, the high point of each week.

3. How would you describe valley moments in your life?

   Valley moments are those of difficulty, sorrow, and heartache—lost employment, a bitter family feud, a looming divorce, a doctor’s grim diagnosis, the death of a loved one, depression, and other trying times.

4. Read Malachi 3:6. Who never changes? How is this comforting for you?

   The Lord does not change. He loves us and is merciful toward us always. Even amid difficulties, we need not question if He is with us or cares for us. The unchanging Lord declares this changeless truth in His Holy Word.
5. Read Psalm 136. What never changes? How is this comforting for you?

“His steadfast love endures forever.” Note in the psalm the acts of the Lord, each done in grace and mercy. He does great wonders (v. 4) and rescues us from our foes (v. 24). God’s love for you is undeserved, unconditional, and unending.

6. Read Psalm 119:89. What is firmly fixed?

God’s love for us never vacillates, and He declares His love for us in His unchanging Word. His promises of forgiveness, grace, mercy, and eternal life are for you. These truths are written, and stand written, never to be erased or broken. God’s Word is inspired, inerrant, and infallible. We can rest our hearts upon the unchanging Word of God in all of life’s changing circumstances.
DEATH, OUR ENEMY, AND CHRIST, OUR VICTOR

You sense a hot breath on your neck. You hear footsteps behind you. You feel a tap on your shoulder. Death is sizing you up. He stalks every one of us. The math is simple: one out of one dies. Death is the great equalizer of humanity, striking young and old, rich and poor, the erudite and the simple, the famous and the unknown. The hourglass of each life holds only so many grains. Each one of us has only a finite number of breaths and heartbeats. Death incessantly taunts, “I’m coming for you.” Sometimes he whispers; sometimes he screams, but he is never silent. His sinister ally, the grave, chimes in, “I am waiting for you.” They blend their voices to form a ghastly duet. Death is closer to you than when you began to read this paragraph—and so is your grave.

Death will not be ignored. Life is fleeting. Reminders are all around us: a wailing siren in the night, the obituary column in the morning paper, the cemetery in the corner of our eye on our commute, the wrinkles sketched on our faces as we look in the mirror, the aches and pains of a normal day, the age spots on our hands. Our family circle gets smaller and smaller as time marches on.

To hold death at bay, we exercise, eat right, dye our hair, pop our vitamin pills, step on the scale, tuck our tummies, and comment on
how others have let themselves go. Euphemisms frame our words as we say someone “passed away” or “expired,” while refusing to say the dreaded word: death. All of this is to no avail for, from the moment of our conception, we begin to die. Our death is only a matter of time. Death can come suddenly or slowly; but come it will to every human being. If you haven’t sensed his hot breath, felt his tap, or heard his footsteps . . . you will.

Death became the unrelenting enemy and constant fiend of humanity from the day of Adam and Eve’s fall into sin. The ramifications of God’s command to Adam and Eve still stand, “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). Adam and Eve, the crown of God’s creation, sinfully listened to the foul lies of the tempter and not the pure Word of their Creator, shattering paradise and infecting us all.

St. Paul writes, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). The intermediate causes of death are disease, accidents, aging, and the like. The ultimate cause of death is sin. “Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:15). Each and every human being is infected with sin and will die. The fall into sin shattered paradise as thorns, thistles, and graves forever mar the once pristine and perfect landscape God had created.

The fevered brow, the laboriously pumping heart, the waning strength, the sickbed, all exist due to sin. As Solomon wrote under divine inspiration,

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will
say, “I have no pleasure in them”; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low—they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets—before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 12:1–8)

Solomon describes the aging process and its ensuing difficulties. Young or old, we should remember our Creator, the One who loves us always. The One who does not change and whose mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:23). Even if we live for many years, our life is then but a slow march to the grave, and the passing years prove increasingly difficult.

The brightness of the sun and glimmering stars fade with our failing eyesight. Backs once straight and strong bend with age. Our teeth, the grinders, once white and sharp become yellowed, dull, or missing entirely. “What did you say?” is repeated numerous times as our ears are shut like doors. Sleep is evasive, so we rise with the earliest of birds, the dawn still streaked with gray. Reaching for things
in high places is fearful—we may fall. Our hair is like almond tree blossoms in their whiteness as the once predominate color fades away, strand by strand. Our bodies move slowly, like a grasshopper dragging itself with difficulty through tall, coarse vegetation.

A picture of any one of us from even a few years ago shows bodily changes. A passing glance in a mirror may miss these changes; a closer look shows lines and wrinkles etched on our brow. All of these changes take place, and then there is a final breath on our neck, a final tap on our shoulder, and a final footstep behind us, and “the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7). In the midst of all this flux and decline, there is a crucial lesson—remember your Creator, for apart from Him all is vanity under the sun.

We face our own death with trepidation and woe.

- Job states, “My spirit is broken; my days are extinct; the graveyard is ready for me” (Job 17:1).
- David states, “For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away” (Psalm 31:10).
- Moses writes, “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away” (Psalm 90:10).

Our death may or may not be far off, but we are troubled at this precise moment when faced with the truth of our own mortality and the cruel statistic that one out of one dies. How is your pulse upon hearing that scriptural truth? How is your blood pressure?

Our ingenuity has allowed us to walk on the moon, to cross oceans in hours instead of months, and to achieve what those a generation ago never dreamed about. We send space probes to study
the landscape of various planets, while earth’s landscape is dotted with grave after grave, cemetery after cemetery. Technological advances abound, yet death remains and will not retreat.

The annals of history tell of mankind’s vain and futile attempts to cure disease and ward off death, all to no avail. For example, it was once thought that wearing the pelt of a wolf cured skin cancer, that a cure for warts was found in touching the coat of a man who had never seen his father, that eating the beating heart of a swallow improved memory loss, and that a cold could be cured with a bag of potatoes hung around the neck—all fruitless endeavors.

Is the eradication of death possible in our technological age? Do human beings have the acumen to overcome death? Perhaps the genetic code can be unlocked or the constitution of our bodies modified to ward off death. Perhaps cryogenics will afford an answer in a few decades or some other new discovery centuries from now will prove the defeat of death. Perhaps we will colonize Mars but then, as on earth, the landscape on that planet will be dotted with graves.

Will our ingenuity render death obsolete? After all, don’t we have shock paddles for a still heart? a ventilator for still lungs? vaccines for various illnesses? Haven’t we eradicated diseases and made notable medical advances? Surely humanity is on a steady climb to overcome death. Scientific and technological advances have been made in the past, with more to follow in the future.

Ironically, those who feverishly attempt to overcome death will themselves all die. Death has a pulse, and the path of each and every human life leads down to the grave. Diseases once thought eliminated by brilliant minds return, such as measles, tuberculosis, and forms of polio. The common cold has not been conquered. The flu continues to keep people from work, close schools, and claim lives.
Living with Grief

In the air, disease-carrying insects such as the mosquito infect humans, bringing malaria and West Nile virus with a bite. On the ground crawl mice and rats, spreading sicknesses such as Hantavirus and salmonellosis. Snakes, fleas, ticks, flesh-eating bacteria, tainted food, and many other dangers are all around each of us. Lives are lost through hurricanes, tornados, tsunamis, earthquakes, fires, and floods.

In seeking human ingenuity to topple death, another tower of Babel is erected, but all proves hapless as the structure crashes to the ground, leaving death standing tall. Life insurance companies will not be closing. Funeral directors, casket manufacturers, and cemetery maintenance staff will always have secure employment. Ethan the Ezrahite had it right long before televisions, computers, supersonic jets, space exploration, and robotic surgery: “What man can live and never see death?” (Psalm 89:48). The single answer spanning past, present, and future: not one.

Perhaps death is simply an inevitable biological occurrence, and the elements constituting the human body disintegrate due to immutable physiological laws. Lutheran scholar Francis Pieper asserts, “To bolster their notion that death would have been man’s lot even without sin, men resort chiefly to the argument that the human body, being matter, must disintegrate, or that such heterogeneous elements as the immaterial soul and the material body cannot possibly live endlessly in harmonious union . . . they are mouthing unscientific bombast.”

Edward W. A. Koehler, in *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, writes,

> No sane person denies the fact of death. It is a tragic situation.
> Man who has the will to live, and does all he can to avoid death,

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must finally die; no charm, no medicine, no science, no power can stay the fatal blow. Man, who is created to live, is now born to die; his way through life but leads to the grave.²

Humanity is the victim of death and will never be the victor. No resolve, no ingenuity, no technological gains can stave off the fiend named death. There will always be an obituary column to read and, one day, our names will appear.

Physical death is defined in Holy Scripture as the separation of the soul from the body.

- The death of the foolish farmer in Luke chapter 12 is described as, “This night your soul is required of you” (Luke 12:20).

- Elijah the prophet petitions God to raise a boy from the dead, praying, “O Lord my God, let this child’s life [soul] come into him again” (1 Kings 17:21).

- Rachel’s death is recorded in these words: “as her soul was departing (for she was dying)” (Genesis 35:18).

- Peter states, “I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things” (2 Peter 1:13–15).

- Abraham was 175 years old, and he “breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah” (Genesis 25:8–9).

St. Paul states, “Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

Upon our Lord’s death, we read, “He bowed His head and gave up His spirit” (John 19:30).

Bodily death is the separation of the soul from the body, an unnatural event that exists due to sin.

Holy Scripture distinguishes between three types of death: physical, spiritual, and eternal. Temporal death is, as afore mentioned, the soul leaving the body. From conception, each human being is spiritually dead and powerless to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The correct anthropology is that we are by nature sinful and unclean. Dr. Engelder states, “Natural man is entirely destitute of the original concreated righteousness and perfection and is capable only of evil, inclined to every evil, and lusts only after evil.”

Isaiah 1:6 aids our understanding: “From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds; they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil.” St. Paul writes, “You were dead in the trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). We, the progeny of Adam and Eve, are by nature sinful and unclean, spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of God. This is true for each of us, bar none. We are unlovable! Yet, as St. Paul writes concerning the Lord, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4–5).

Johann Gerhard writes,

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With his poison, the basilisk of hell had infected the entire human nature in our first parents; therefore the Son of God assumed the whole and perfect nature to deliver the whole man from this poison. He whom the serpent has wounded fatally cannot prepare a medicine for himself. Thus we could not have prepared a cure for ourselves after we were struck by the infernal serpent. However, in the womb of Mary, God prepared the most precious medicine against those stings by uniting personally, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, the divine and human nature in Christ so that He would be our physician and our medicine.  

The Lord of mercy gives the gifts of faith, forgiveness, and eternal life in Holy Baptism as He marks, claims, calls, washes, and mercifully declares, “You are Mine.” Pure and profound gifts are poured out at the font that can be likened to fresh dew all the days of our life. The water has long since dried from our brow, but the daily blessings of our Baptism remain. As Luther states in his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed,

> I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

Additionally, Dr. Luther states,

> Thus we see what a very splendid thing Baptism is. It snatches us from the jaws of the devil, makes us God’s own, restrains and removes sin, and then daily strengthens the new man within us. It is and remains ever efficacious until we pass from this state of misery to eternal glory.

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5 Small Catechism, Third Article.