

O Holy Spirit, Grant Us Grace

What is it that makes death such an awful thing? The author of Ecclesiastes shared his view: “The dead know nothing... even their name is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 9:5–6).

It’s not hard to understand why someone would have that perspective. There is a total powerlessness that comes with death. The body of a dead person can’t do, say, or feel anything. It’s disturbing to imagine ourselves that way.

The Bible often seems to have that hopelessness and powerlessness in mind when it talks about the terror of death. Maybe for that reason, it uses the word “death” to talk about more than just the physical event that happens to our bodies. The Bible says that unbelief is also a kind of death (Ephesians 2:1). People who don’t know God are dead – they are powerless and are totally controlled by sin and the forces of this world. Dead people can do nothing. Only God can save them.

In a way, “O Holy Spirit, Grant Us Grace” is a hymn all about death. It’s common for the last stanza of Lutheran hymns to talk about the hope that we have as we die and are looking forward to heaven. But this hymn is unusual in that it brings up death in the first stanza. In fact, all three stanzas talk about spiritual or physical death in one form or another.

This approach fits very well with the view of our lives that this hymn is leading us to take. As we notice from the first line, this hymn is a prayer to the Holy Spirit. It is appropriate that we would pray to the Spirit when we think about the different kinds of death that a person can experience and the Spirit’s work. Jesus put it this way: “The Spirit gives life.... The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life” (John 6:63). Jesus was talking about life in every sense of the word. The Holy Spirit’s work is to give us a life with God that starts before we die and continues forever afterward.

That life with God is what this hymn centers on. In the hymn, we ask the Holy Spirit for the blessings that come with being alive in God. We ask him to give us spiritual blessings that endure beyond the present and continue into eternity.

The first stanza uses that thought to point out the importance of our faith. In it we ask for the Spirit’s grace to enable us to love and serve Jesus throughout our lives so that we’re ready for the day that we die. Believing in Jesus is more than just a ticket to heaven. Yet, the Bible does teach us to live with our eyes on our futures. Jesus told his disciples a parable about a foolish rich man who didn’t give any thought to God

while he lived. When he died suddenly, he was totally unprepared (Luke 12:16–21). We might not feel emotionally prepared to die at this point in our lives. But if we know and trust in what Jesus has done for us, we are spiritually prepared for our earthly death.

In the second stanza we ask the Holy Spirit to make us die to sin. This is a kind of spiritual death, but it's different than the spiritual death that unbelievers experience. The death that the hymn is talking about here is described in Romans 6:3–14. Paul says that our sinful selves died with Jesus. When we were baptized into Jesus, we were connected to him in his death on the cross and in his resurrection. Our sins and the sinful heart that lives in each of us died with Jesus.

And, Paul says, “the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you” (Romans 8:11). Paul encourages us to “count [ourselves] dead to sin but alive to God” (Romans 6:11). By this he means that we should let the sin that died with Jesus be powerless over us. We should not let it rule over us, because we belong to God now. As the hymn points out, this happens in our hearts through the Word, the bread of life. God's law kills us through our sin. His gospel raises us to life again.

The last stanza turns our thoughts again to the end of our earthly life. It's true that “death's hour” is often “bitter.” It's not a sin if death scares us. The psalms record several prayers by people who desperately wanted to continue living (e.g., Psalms 13, 55, 88). But death is the way that God brings to completion everything that he has done in our lives. Our souls will go to our Savior's hand. We will lay down our earthly bodies, broken and scarred by our own sins and those of others. And then, Jesus will call our bodies to come out of their graves—healed, made new, untouched by any sin. And we will be with him in a peace that never ends.

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“O Holy Spirit, Grant Us Grace” was written by Bartholomäus Ringwaldt, a pastor in the second generation of Lutheranism. He lived in Brandenburg, a territory centered in Berlin, Germany, and served in several cities, most notably Langenfeld (today, Długoszyn, Poland). He wrote at least 165 hymns during his life.