

The text of the article studied in these lessons is found in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. XLIII, starting at page 113.

In October 2015, the text was available at the following address as a .pdf document

<http://www.rockrohr.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Luther-WHETHER-ONE-MAY-FLEE-FROM-A-DEADLY-PLAGUE.pdf>

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Lessons originally written in September and October 2015.

A Study of  
*Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague*, by Martin Luther  
Part 1 of 5

What kind of questions do people have when a disaster occurs which claims many lives?

**Publisher's Introduction (partial)**

**115 ¶1-2**

What is the disease, it's symptoms?

*Bubonic plague. Many disgusting symptoms mentioned.*

What would your reaction be to someone with the disease?

*Would probably differ by person. If someone close, I would be very concerned. If not close, less willing to help. A certain level of disgust must be overcome.*

**115 ¶3**

What was Martin Luther's experience and action in time of a plague?

*He stuck out the plague even when he had the freedom to leave and others died around him.*

**115 ¶4**

Who is writing to whom? From what place?

*Christians from Breslau (now Wroclaw, Poland) were writing Luther.*

Why are they writing?

*Teacher: This is a very noble, high-minded request of Luther. Usually people are asking lots of questions like, "Why is this happening? Why would a loving God let this happen?" This question is not the self-centered or God-questioning sort of question people usually ask at these times. This is a question about what God wants a Christian to do at these times.*

**Review of the Introduction**

True or False:

Luther's opinions on the matter of fleeing from the plague were the opinions of a desk-bound academic.

*False. While an academic, he had first-hand experience with the plague. Not conjecture.*

Agree or Disagree:

If a plague struck Hardin county with a 30%-90% mortality rate, I would be inclined to get in my car and spend some time with family in another state.

*I cut out part of the introduction because the next two pages are spoilers – they tell you Luther's conclusions before you get to Luther's writing.*

## **Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague, by Martin Luther**

### **119 ¶1-2**

This reply was not merely written, it was printed. What *spiritual* benefit was there in having this printed? (Look at the first Bible passage Luther cited: 1 Corinthians 1:10.)

*This could be a reference for others. Unity in action and practice makes people more certain, emboldens, creates unity.*

For Us: Which is better in our churches: more uniformity of practice, or more diversity of practice?

*In general, uniformity creates unity. It is one of the marks of our church wherever you go in this nation, or even the world.*

### **120 ¶2**

From this paragraph it seems that the Christians at Breslau put before Martin Luther two possible reactions. What were they?

- 1) *To stay put, no matter what. This is under the banner of "trusting God."*
- 2) *To flee if one has no obligations.*

What other options do you imagine that people would consider?

*Flee regardless of obligations. There may be other options.*

### **120 ¶3**

Martin Luther says that Christians who stay in a plague-ravaged city have strong faith and should be commended. Do you agree? Or do you have another opinion of them?

*In general I would agree. However, endangering oneself or those under one's care would be foolish, if not reckless endangerment.*

### **120 ¶4**

Sum up Luther's point in this paragraph.

He uses the illustration of a weak and a strong walker. How does this apply to the plague situation?

Look at the Bible passage from Romans 15:1. How does this apply to the plague situation?

*While some can do the heroic, we should understand that not all can.*

Think of Luther's illustration of the two people walking and Romans 15:1.

In what areas of life have you seen stronger and weaker walkers in faith?

What should be a stronger person's bearing toward the weaker?

*Patience, willing to take up slack.*

# A Study of *Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague*, by Martin Luther

Part 2 of 5

## Review of Part One

- “The plague” – what disease was it? It’s mortality rate? (p.115, ¶2)
- What was Martin Luther’s personal experience with the plague? (p.115, ¶3)
- Why did Martin Luther write this pamphlet? (p.116, ¶2)
- The people who wrote to Luther seemed to have been divided about the right way for a Christian to react to the plague. The two options they were considering were a) stay in the city and trust God to help; b) flee from the city “if one holds no public office.” (p.120, ¶2)
- Just before today’s reading, Luther commended those who were strong enough to stay in the city and trust God. But he also said that such a heavy burden could not be borne by all people. (p.120, ¶4)

### 121 ¶2

Now Luther begins to get specific. He first addresses the clergy. Sum up his words about what the clergy should do. Why should they do it?

*He states that the clergy should stay in the city. They have an obligation to give spiritual guidance to people at the time in their life when they most need it. If they are certain that there will be enough remaining in the city for this purpose, then they may flee.*

### 121 ¶3

What does he mean when he says, “mayors, judges, and the like are under obligation to remain.”

*They have a greater duty to the general public.*

Do you think public officials of Luther’s time did this? Would those of our time?

*Maybe some did, probably others did not. Often times some of our “leaders” do not follow the laws they demand other people follow. For many, it would be the same in a time of danger.*

So, what are the implications of taking a public office?

*Taking public office, obligates someone to make sacrifices, even suffer loss, for those under their care.*

Imagine getting into a discussion with someone about this point (or similar, like a foreign invasion, or a shipwreck, or a building fire). How would you *briefly* sum up when a person *should* stay behind, even if it involves danger?

*It will be interesting to hear people’s ideas! You really should be able to condense it down to no more than two sentences – to make the argument very simple. More or less, it is: Before a person flees, one must make sure all under his care and responsibility will be cared for. (Compare it to a commanding officer’s responsibility to his troops.)*

**122 ¶2&3** *You can skip reading these two paragraphs if time requires. You can summarize briefly: "As we saw with pastors and public officials, Martin Luther tells servants and masters, parents, neighbors, even employees that they should stay to fulfill their obligations to others. The exception is only if a replacement can be found." But do ask the next two questions.*

What Biblical principle do you see at work in all of his advice, whether to clergy, public officials, servants, masters, employees? (Matthew 25:41-46; 1 Timothy 5:8)

*It again comes back to the idea that people must look after other people in their care before they are concerned about saving their own necks.*

For whom would you stay put in the face of a deadly plague? For spouse, parents, children, employer, neighbor?

*An answer individuals will have to give.*

**122 ¶4** (and onto the following page)

What is Luther's judgment on the self-preservation impulse?

*He basically sees it as a healthy instinct that God has placed in us. It, by itself, is not a bad thing.*

**123 ¶2&3** *You can skip these paragraphs if time requires*

*These paragraphs bring up examples in our lives, and in the Bible, when people have fled from danger. In these examples, we would probably not convict people of sin.*

**124 ¶2&3** (and onto the following page)

What does Luther prove about people who say, "You should not flee from danger. Instead, you must stay and trust God!" Ever met people like that?

*Like the instinct for self-preservation, this thinking can be a positive thing. BUT, he proves that this is a foolish statement if it is pushed to its logical extreme. For then we would even view it as ungodly to get out of a burning building. This idea must be balanced.*

**125 ¶2**

What should every Christian remember, whether fleeing from the plague or staying put?

*We must remember that fleeing does not guarantee that we will survive, nor does trusting God and staying put. All our days and our plans must be put into God's hands.*

## Summary

Remember Martin Luther's actions when the plague struck Wittenberg.

How do the very bold and brave often look at the timid and weak in times of difficulty and danger? How does Martin Luther look at them?

*Often they look down on the timid and weak. Martin Luther has quite a bit of mercy on them.*

Do you think he is too merciful? In what way?

*???* *This will be for individual's to answer.*

In what part of your life could you be more accepting and understanding of people's weaknesses?

*This will vary from person to person. However, most of us can be overbearing in certain parts of our lives, because we are very strong in that particular way—more than most other people.*

A Study of  
***Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague***

by Martin Luther

Part 3 of 5

**Review of Parts One and Two**

- The people who wrote to Luther were considering two options: a) stay in the city and trust God to help; b) flee from the city “if one holds no public office.” (p.120, ¶12)

Luther commented:

- A person is free to flee if he has no responsibility to the people remaining behind. (p.121, ¶13)
- A person with responsibility to those left behind must make sure they are cared for. When he is sure they are taken care of, then he can leave. (p.121, ¶13)
- There are some who say that a true Christian will not flee, but stay behind and trust God. While Luther said there are good things in that thinking, he also had some reservations. Do you remember what he said on this point? (p.124-125)

**125 ¶13 to 126 ¶12**

- A) On pages 124-125 (in the previous class) he had said, “Freezing weather and winter are also God’s punishment and can cause death. Why run to get inside or near a fire? Be strong and stay outside until it becomes warm again.” Though not speaking of the plague, he demonstrates, with sarcasm, that at some point all of us will *and must* flee from danger.
- B) On pages 125-126 Martin Luther talks about our duty to love our neighbors in these two paragraphs. Often that help will entail a cost to us.

What is Martin Luther saying by putting these two ideas next to each other?

*He is pointing out that we must balance between these two concepts – our own safety and the safety of others. His point is that this question of whether or not to flee from the plague does not have an easy answer. The answer will only be found when a Christian truly considers the many different things God has to say to him.*

**126 ¶13**

Martin Luther thought that one of the best ways to take care of the sick, would be that public institutions would be created that could care for the sick. Thus the public would have an organized way to show love for needy neighbors.

**127 ¶12**

The “Germ Theory” of disease was still centuries in the future.

What of Luther here sounds scientific? What does not?

*He has the idea of a contagiousness, often by air. There is some inkling of Germ Theory there. However, his connecting it to evil spirits would be more than we are willing to agree to.*

How much authority or weight does he give to his ideas?

*He simply says this is his “opinion”. He does something wise here. He does not speak more than*

*he ought about his ideas. Frequently Christians over the years have spoken about things that they were not authorities in, in an authoritative way, and looked the fools for it.*

### 127 ¶3

Explain how Satan uses our natural reactions to lead us into sin.

*Helping gruesomely sick people can be very difficult for many people. It is repulsive. Satan uses that natural reaction so that we end up neglecting the people we ought to help. He also uses that so that we despair of God's help.*

Read Romans 7:15-19. *Sometimes sinful nature tempts in ways more mundane than we think.*

### 128 ¶1

How should we respond to Satan's temptations to fear and negligence. (This paragraph has the first of two responses.)

*"I know what God wants me to do, therefore I will do it. If Satan opposes it, I will fight the temptation all the harder." This emphasizes that we are in spiritual warfare. I had a colleague who would say, "There is no virtue in refusing sins which hold no temptation for you." Comments.*

### 128 ¶2

What is the second response when Satan tempts us with fear and disgust?

*God promises to help and bless those who do his will. This is not a guarantee of safety, but of God's blessing. (C.S. Lewis' book The Final Battle. In the end they die, but are blessed beyond belief.)*

### 129 ¶2 *(can skip this one if time is short)*

Continuing from the previous paragraph, this one encourages us to not fear because of God's promises to protect us

### 129 ¶3 onto next page

"Therefore, dear friends, let us not become so desperate as to desert our own..." "Therefore" means there are reasons. What are those reasons?

Previously Luther has emphasized love as the thing that should motivate us to serve our neighbor. What does he use in this paragraph?

*In Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant (Mt 18), Jesus first of all wants us to love because of the great love shown us (18:32-33). But if we will not be loving for that reason, then at least threats should frighten us from doing that which is evil (35). So, too, here.*

### Summary

How easy it is to create a reason from an excuse?

What are times we *could* help people in need? What sorts of reasons do we have for not helping them?

A Study of  
***Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague***

by Martin Luther

Part 4 of 5

**Review of Part Three**

- When we are tempted to run from the plague, to the detriment of our neighbor, Martin Luther said we should oppose the devil with “two heavy blows”:
  - We must go on the offensive against the fear created by the devil and our sinful flesh. We should boldly do what God wants us to do, knowing it is good and pleasing to him for just that reason: because it is pleasing to God.
  - We must entrust ourselves to God’s care. While there are many dangers in the plague, we should trust that God will take care of us—according to his wisdom and love.

**130 ¶2**

True or False: “If it were Christ or his mother who were laid low by illness, everybody... would gladly become a servant or helper.”

If True, why are some so willing to help certain people?

*Celebrity status can do this even in our day. Meanwhile, we do not show the appropriate interest in our fellow man who has a lowly status.*

**131 ¶2**

Have you heard of or experienced examples of this sort of behavior? Share.

*There have been a couple instances in the last year of snake handlers (in churches!) being bitten by snakes. At least one of them refused anti-venom because he believed God would save him. He died. Also Scientology, JW’s (re: transfusions)*

**131 ¶3-4 (and onto 132)**

These paragraphs are similar to ¶2.

In Luther’s words, what is God’s judgment on people who are “brave” to the point of recklessness?

*They are guilty of killing themselves.*

**132 ¶2-3 (and onto 133)**

What are the worst examples of scoundrels in the time of a plague?

*In ¶2, it is unthinking people who end up spreading the disease and killing others. In ¶3 Luther reports rumors of people who actually intentionally infect others.*

How does this resonate with our own time?

*This sounds not unlike some of the mass murderers of our day. Some are violent publicly. Others operate on the sly, such as doctors who are known to have killed hundreds. There are vandals of all levels, destroying anything from property to life. Human nature does not change. Illustrates the necessity of government to exist for our protection.*



### 133 ¶2

In summary, what are the two Christian responses to this disease, 1) on the part of the sick and 2) on the part of the healthy?

*The sick must help keep other people safe by even doing unpleasant things such as quarantine and the like. The healthy should compassionately treat such people, not abandoning them to their own ends.*

“The devil enjoys himself at the terror and flight which he causes among us.” What Bible passages or events can you think of in support of that view?

*These passages touch on the subject in diverse ways. Probably pick one or two that you prefer to highlight: Genesis 3; David's census; Job; Zech 3 (kind of); Mt 25:31; Judas; Lk 22:31; John 8:44; Ac 5:3,11; 2 Cor 2:11; James 3:15-16; Rev 12:12*

### Summary

A Study of  
***Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague***

by Martin Luther

Part 5 of 5

**Review of Part Four**

- Luther had decried the irresponsibility of some people in regard to the plague, and urged people to give thought to their ways.
  - Some are reckless with their own health when they know better. Such people are guilty of suicide in Luther's eyes.
  - Some thoughtless people end up killing others because they do not stop to think that their moving about with the disease spreads it to others.
  - Finally, some people actually take delight in spreading the plague to others. Luther urged authorities to punish such people if they be found.
- The top of page 134 was the end of Luther's original letter to the Christians at Breslau.

**134 ¶3**

Pages 134-138 are a later addition by Martin Luther. 134-135 are quite valuable, 136-138 are less useful. We will skip 136-138.

On pages 134-135 Luther gives "some brief instructions on how one should care and provide for the soul in time of death."

**134 ¶4**

First, people should "attend church and listen to the sermon so that they learn through God's word how to \_\_\_\_\_ (*fill in the blank*)."

How comfortable is our culture with that sort of talk?

*Imagine saying that to your neighbor as an answer to "Why should I go to church?" The heathen world has a great aversion to talking about death. A prominent British radio commentator (Lucy Callaway) voiced suspicion of any who talk about death; one WELS pastor was told, "You talk about death too much"; in society, we don't call them "funerals" any more, why?*

Do we need to talk about the subject? How?

*We need to do this. Always at some point the subject must be broached: "What happens when you die?" It is the final question.*

**134 ¶5**

In order to be prepared for death, what are some things he proposes Christians should do? Are these any different from what we should all be doing?

*Receive Communion, reconcile to neighbors. In short, act like Christians are supposed to act all the time. But make special measures to do so if you think death is near, to put the soul at ease with God, and remove lingering doubts about our relationship with God.*

**135 ¶2-3**

What is the final thing he suggests a sick person should do? Who will be responsible to carry this out?

*The pastor should be called well before death. It should not be left for the last moment, or ignored. Great spiritual good and peace can be achieved. This requires the attention of those who tend to the sick person.*

### **Summary of Entire Book, *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague***

The Christians at Breslau asked Martin Luther which of these two possible reactions was the right one in the face of a deadly plague:

- 1) To stay put, no matter what. This is under the banner of “trusting God.”
- 2) To flee if one has no obligations.

What was Martin Luther’s answer?

What are some principles that have come up repeatedly through our study of *Whether One May Flee a Deadly Plague*?

Where, or in what circumstances of our lives (21<sup>st</sup> century America), could we apply these principles?

What would be the result of us living these principles out?

The Plague of Cyprian

The events of the plague

1. *Immediately after the beginning of the Decian Persecution of 250.*
2. *From 251-266AD*
3. *Many Romans thought plague was a scourge because of Christianity*
4. *Pagan rulers and wealthy fled the city of Carthage.*
5. *Cyprian, Christian bishop, stayed in city and organized paliatory care*
6. *Generous nursing and burial assistance given by Christians*
7. *Many died, also of the Christians, yet Christians were willing, supportive, even joyful in their own death*

The upshot of that plague

8. *The Christian’s loving behavior won popular support for Christianity. The degree of such is a bit difficult to ascertain, but some say it played an integral part in moving Christianity from a very small minority religion to, within 50 years, the religion of the Roman Empire.*
9. *100 years later, Emperor Julian, in encouraging a pagan revival, told pagans that they needed to adopt the caring attitude of Christians.*

*Much from <http://www.unityinchrist.com/LegacyOfLove.htm>, an informative though not scholarly article. (accessed Oct 2015)*

1 Peter 2:12; 3:15-16